

Sports Illustrated

THE NEXT...

HERSCHEL WALKER? EARL CAMPBELL? MARSHALL FAULK? BO?

Leonard Fournette Thanks You for the Comparisons, but **5-0 LSU Tiger** Will Do Just Fine

By **ALAN SHIPNUCK** P. 30

*"In that
ball the
whole of
Louisiana
is in your
hands."*

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LSU's tailback is already calling to mind the game's greats

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Marianna Massey for Sports Illustrated

PHOTOGRAPH BY

Jeff Gross
For Sports Illustrated



SI.COM

FOR OCT. 19, 2015

SUPER BOWL 100

What will the NFL look like come Super Bowl 100? *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* and *Wired* have teamed up to forecast the enormous changes on the horizon for the NFL over the next five decades. From virtual-reality training to gene-splicing, the **Super Bowl 100** series, presented by Gatorade and Microsoft Surface, will explore every angle of NFL innovation, concluding with a sci-fi dispatch from the Big Game in 2066. Go to SI.com/SB100 and Wired.com/SB100



SI.COM'S Top Stories

1 The Hard News

For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com—including a feature on ESPN's **Ed Werder** and his daughter's and son-in-law's rare brain cancer—go to SI.com/topstories



2 Beauty Between the Hedges

A UCLA alum discovers the passion of SEC football

3 Why Jim Brown Matters

How the Browns' legend still towers over the NFL

4 Reinventing the Pelicans

New Orleans has learned an entirely new way of thinking

5 NFL Week 5 Predictions

Who's going to step up after another Cowboys injury?



SI Digital Bonus

Heavy Freight

From the SI Vault
April 5, 1999

Cecil Collins comes with lots of baggage and little college experience but enough talent to be one of the first running backs taken in the NFL draft

By John Ed Bradley

To read this and other stories from the *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* archive, go to SI.com/vault



Road to Recovery

Unfortunately, injuries are all too common in sports. But how do injuries—not to mention nagging

wear and tear on the body—affect a player's ability not only to play again but also to return to peak form? For an in-depth look at injured athletes and their hard roads back to competition, go to SI.com/thecomeback, a new series from the editors of *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* and WebMD.

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ONE OF THE
STRONG?

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9PM

NICK JONAS

JONATHAN TUCKER

JOANNA GOING

AUDIENCE
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**Leading
Off**

+

1
of
3

Chase Scene

■ The Dodgers trailed the Mets 2-1 in the seventh inning last Saturday in Game 2 of the NL Division Series, with runners on the corners and one out, when L.A.'s Howie Kendrick hit a ground ball to second. Chase Utley tried to break up a double play, barreling into shortstop Ruben Tejada, fracturing Tejada's right fibula, as the game-tying run scored. After a review Utley was called safe because Tejada had failed to touch the base, and the Dodgers went on to win 5-2, evening the series. Upon *further* further review, by the commissioner's office, Utley was suspended for two games because his slide violated a rule designed to protect infielders. Utley appealed the ruling.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
**KEITH
BIRMINGHAM**
PASADENA STAR-NEWS/
ZUMAPRESS.COM









+

2
3**Leading
Off**

Plenty Moore

■ Maya Moore's buzzer-beating three-pointer gave the Lynx an 80-77 victory over Indiana in Game 3 of the WNBA finals on Oct. 9, in Indianapolis. Two nights later, despite Moore's 20 points, the Fever beat Minnesota 75-69 to tie the series.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DAVID SHERMAN
NBAE/GETTY IMAGES





+

33

**Leading
Off**

Esteemed Self

■ The Cavaliers' LeBron James borrowed a cellphone to snap a selfie with fans in Cincinnati during a timeout in the second half of a preseason game against the Hawks on Oct. 7. Atlanta defeated Cleveland 98-96 as James had eight points, seven rebounds and five assists.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOE ROBBINS
GETTY IMAGES

INBOX

FOR OCT. 5, 2015



Tom Verducci's lovely, poetic tribute to **Lawrence Peter Berra** may be the most moving eulogy in American sports history. The accompanying photos, too, hit the bull's-eye, especially the one of Yogi, the wide-eyed Mickey Mantle and the wild Billy Martin. Just as Berra did 1,175 times, his death touched home.

Paul Morrison, Canonsburg, Pa.



While on patrol in Vietnam on March 8, 1971, one of our guys pulled out his transistor radio and quietly told us **Muhammad Ali** lost to Joe Frazier. We were all in such shock. Nothing bad

was said about Ali not serving. We respected him for his convictions and his skill in the ring. On behalf of Bravo Company, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry of the Americal Division, I wish him the best.

John Hofer, Cross Plains, Wis.

Tim Layden's story on Ali was a great tribute to the man he has become. His humanitarian work and courageous battle against Parkinson's are praiseworthy. But let's not forget that as a young man, Ali didn't always practice good sportsmanship. So much of the immature and egotistical behavior of today's athletes can be traced to his actions.

Don Jones, John Day, Ore.

I couldn't believe that MLB commissioner Rob Manfred told Dan Patrick he'd have to think about whether he'd vote **Pete Rose** into the Hall of Fame if he were eligible. The answer is obviously no. Manfred's job is to preserve the integrity of the game.

Lance McCord
Holly Springs, N.C.



COVER

With all due respect to **Muhammad Ali** and your fine piece about him, the late Yogi Berra should have been on the cover.

Ted Isseks
Rock Hill, N.Y.



PAGE 17

SCORECARD

I would argue that **Jordan Spieth** did not "inherit the mantle of world's best golfer," as you say in the headline of the opening essay. Spieth did it the old-fashioned way: He earned it.

Bill Henry
Glenwood, Md.



PAGE 68

POINT AFTER

I once turned on an NHL playoff game only to witness **Marty McSorley** jam his stick into the ribs of an unsuspecting opponent and get just a five-minute penalty. I never watched another game—a loss given hockey's elegance when played the right way. Kudos to **Chris Nilan** for his thoughtful column.

John Briggs
Fair Oaks, Calif.

CONTACT

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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

SCORECARD

Fantasy Land

Lawmakers are looking into the unregulated world of daily fantasy sports, and a professional player explains why it might be a good thing

BY JUSTIN VAN ZUIDEN

I STEPPED outside my house in suburban Chicago one sweltering May morning as a stiff wind blew across my yard, and one thought crossed my mind: *The baseballs are gonna be flying out of Wrigley today.*

This was in 2011, when daily fantasy games were in their infancy, a hobby as niche as 19th-century stamp collecting. As a sports fan who'd always been obsessed with numbers, I first became intrigued when I saw a banner ad for Daily Joust, a website that allowed you to create lineups in various sports and win money based on the performance of the players you picked. I deposited \$100, lost all my money over two months and had fun. I'm a CPA, with an accountant's cautious demeanor, but I'm also competitive: If others

were making money off their sports knowledge, I wanted in too. I deposited another \$200 and told myself that if I lost that, I was done.

That spring day four years ago the Cubs were playing the Astros, so I entered four lineups for a total of \$40, loading them with players from Houston and Chicago. The Astros won 12–7, with second baseman Jeff Keppinger coming through for me by going 4 for 5 with a double and homer. I pocketed \$1,800. Over the next several months I regularly entered lineups, and I saw my winnings rise to almost \$50,000 by year's end. I was Justin the mild-mannered accountant to my coworkers and neighbors, who still know nothing about my other life. But my reputation as

I put in another \$200 and told myself that if I lost it I was done.

stlcardinals84—I'm the 45th-ranked pro on Rotogrinders—began to grow within the daily fantasy-sports world, which is now a multibillion-dollar industry.

Last week I began to wonder if the end times for that world have come, as news spread that New York State attorney general Eric Schneiderman was launching an investigation into the business practices of DraftKings and FanDuel, the two largest daily-fantasy operators (and websites I play on). The cause for



alarm was Ethan Haskell, a DraftKings analyst who during Week 3 published an article that included a pregame listing of NFL players with their ownership percentages. That led me and most other pros I know to believe that Haskell had the information before it was public, which he then could have used to his advantage. Haskell won \$350,000 on FanDuel that week, and our eyebrows rose. But we didn't know how big a deal it would become.

When the national media pounced on the story—*The New York Times* called it a “major scandal”—and politicians lined up with their pitchforks (“There’s absolutely scandalous conduct taking place,” Senator Harry Reid said), there was no denying that it was a horrible week for the industry, even though DraftKings and FanDuel cleared Haskell of wrongdoing. (I’m inclined to believe them, but, I, like many fellow pros, would be interested in seeing the results of an outside investigation.) In reality this moment was inevitable—at some point, someone was going to take a closer look at this unregulated business—and ultimately it will be a good thing. At the least it will be a lesson to DraftKings and FanDuel, companies now valued at more than a billion dollars each: If they have enough money to inundate the airwaves with ads, they should have enough people keeping tabs on the games to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Daily fantasy should be legal—but it also needs to be regulated.

The fear among players is that new rules will be introduced by people who

don’t understand the industry, who characterize daily fantasy as gambling. There are elements of gambling in it, no one can deny that. But the comparisons between the Haskell leak and an insider-trading scandal reinforce the idea of daily fantasy as more than a dice game. The stock market is a perfect parallel; I always think of my player ownership as shares. The game rewards quantitative reasoning, strategy and also the hours I spend every night scouring the Internet for tidbits (a coach’s comment may give some insight into a player’s playing time, for instance) and staying on top of late-breaking news that may affect a lineup. I feel as if I’m in control of the money I’m playing with, which I don’t feel when I’m staring at the board at a Vegas sports book.

Part of the Lotto-like image, perhaps, derives from those incessant ads, in which bros high-five a field goal, talking about how they flipped \$2 into \$1 million. The stories of those million-dollar winners turn heads, but there are more people like me that you never hear about. I’ve been steadily earning more every year, and so far this year I’ve made more money—the low six figures as of last weekend—from fantasy sports than from my CPA job.

Now that the rival companies are working together for the first time—both have banned employees from participating in paid games—I am optimistic that the industry can police itself so that outsiders won’t need to get involved. I’m setting a lineup today, tomorrow and hopefully the day after that, too.

After last week, though, I’m also keeping my day job. □

GO FIGURE

16

Difference, in inches, between the heights of Astros second baseman Jose Altuve and Royals pitcher **Chris Young**, the largest variance in postseason history. In Game 1 the 5' 6" Altuve singled to center off the 6' 10" Young.



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CONSECUTIVE LOSSES FOR COLUMBIA—THE LONGEST ACTIVE STREAK IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S FBS OR FCS DIVISIONS—BEFORE THE LIONS BEAT WAGNER 26-3 AT HOME LAST SATURDAY.

100

Consecutive games, dating to 2005, that Oregon had won when it led by at least 10 points. Last Saturday the Ducks blew a 31-21 fourth-quarter lead over Washington State in Eugene, losing 45-38 in double overtime.



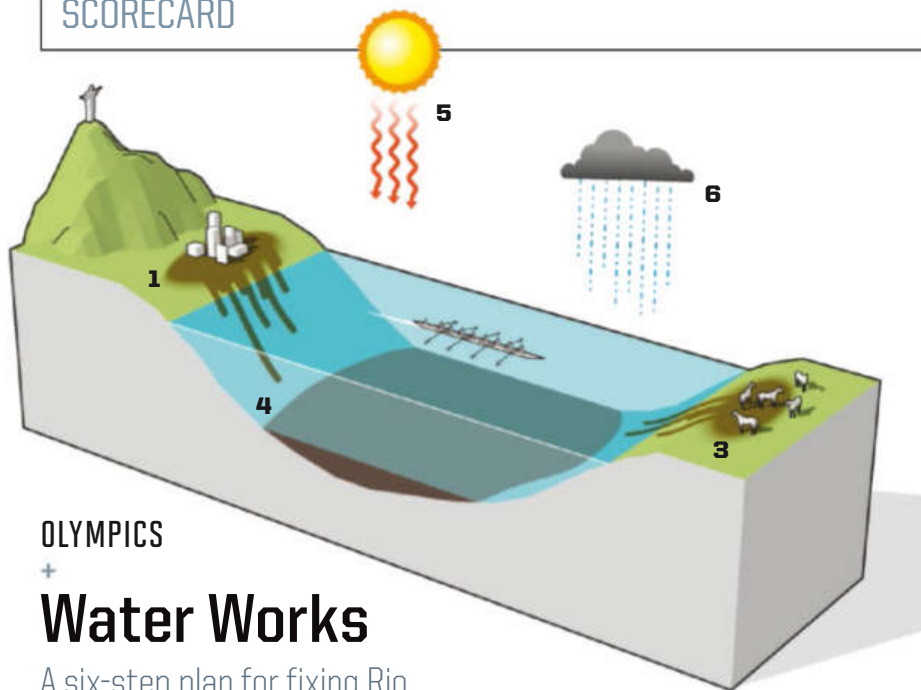
57

Years since Wales last took part in a major international soccer tournament, a streak that will end at Euro 2016. Wales and star Gareth Bale (left) secured a spot in next year's event with Israel's loss to Cyprus, ending a Welsh drought that dates to the 1958 World Cup.





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Water Works

A six-step plan for fixing Rio

AFTER ROWING AND canoe sprint test events at Rio's Olympic venues earlier this year, several athletes blamed subsequent stomach and leg infections on their exposure to the highly polluted waters of the host city's Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon and Guanabara Bay. Here's how the water got so dirty, and how it might be cleaned in time for the Summer Games next year. —*Tom Taylor*

1 Cut off the trash:

Every day, thousands of gallons of sewage and hundreds of tons of garbage flow into Rio's water system, including the lagoon and bay. The city promised to build eight new water-treatment facilities and cut this inflow by 80% ahead of Rio 2016, but it has built just one.

2 Make a change:

A long-term solution will take years and lots of money, but there's a feasible short-term option that could make the Games safer for participants. It starts with moving the sailing events to the ocean and redirecting waste away from the lagoon.

3 Patrol the shore:

The source of some of the bacteria and viruses may be animal sewage and decomposing wildlife, especially rats, but including pigs and horses. Local authorities could attempt to remove or cull these creatures in areas around the lagoon.

4 Let it lie:

Toxic industrial pollutants, such as heavy metals, trapped in sediment do not biodegrade, and they are complicated and expensive to clean up. So for the time being those sediments should remain undisturbed.

5 Feel the heat:

Stopping the supply of sewage flowing into the water will allow ultraviolet light from the sun to kill off the bacteria and viruses. Although this natural cleaning process takes time, it could do enough to make the water safe for competitors.

6 Watch the sky:

One pitfall involves the weather. The Games are scheduled during Rio's dry season, but storms could wash pollution from streets into the lagoon, and rain and winds could stir the water and disturb the lake floor, recirculating pollution sediment to the surface.

Hitting 60

A D-III power reaches a milestone

LAST WEEKEND the rain arrived in the northern Oregon town of McMinnville, as it always does this time of the year. And, just as predictably, the local football team won. Every season for six decades now, the Division III Linfield College Wildcats have won more games than they've lost, a record streak, for all divisions, dating back to when Eisenhower was in office. Most years, as in last season's 11–2 campaign, the wins are abundant. In other years the team is just a game over .500. To coach at Linfield is to wake up every morning shouldering a half-century's worth of high expectations.

This Saturday, against Willamette, the Wildcats (4–0, No. 3 in the nation) can extend the streak to 60 seasons. The scene will be “like a huge reunion,” says junior quarterback Sam Riddle (*below*): alumni, grandchildren, coaches past and present. As it is, Linfield ends huddles by shouting, “Family.” Students dye their hair Wildcats purple. And longtime fans speak wistfully of being outlived by the streak. This is football at its best—not just sports but community. —*Chris Ballard*



A close-up photograph of a white baseball with red stitching, resting on a patch of green grass. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

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Prez Conferences

■ WHEN REPUBLICAN presidential candidate Jeb Bush wanted to invite Twitter followers to join him at a tailgate for last Saturday's Georgia-Tennessee game in Knoxville, his staff got busy with Photoshop, redesigning the SEC logo to fit his name. Which other college emblems lend themselves to White House hopefuls? A few suggestions.



BIG TEN ▶ BEN CARSON

Both are surging in the polls and have a strong academic background, although any claim to long-term dominance appears as tenuous as a Cardale Jones tweet.



ACC ▶ CHRIS CHRISTIE

Like Boston College, Pitt and Syracuse, Christie and his strengths don't seem to translate to the South, but, Ay, screw them if they can't take a joke.



C-USA ▶ HILLARY CLINTON

Clinton's pedigree and pants suits scream Power 5, but in reality she's not even the biggest name in her own backyard and has had to achieve a lot just to get a shot.



SUN BELT ▶ BERNIE SANDERS

Each connotes shuffleboard tournaments and early-bird dinners and can produce a surprising early-season story that everyone knows will fade before November.



MAAC ▶ MARCO RUBIO

They don't have the war chests or fan bases of their well-heeled competitors, but they're strong, and if taken lightly, they can knock off anyone.



NCAA ▶ DONALD TRUMP

Like the governing body, Trump looms over everything in a manner that seems at once calculated and capricious, to the point that it's hard to tell if either is serious.

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE



Bryce Harper

Texas

Chili, hot; weather, hot; Charlie Strong's seat after a 24-17 win over Oklahoma, not as hot.



HOT ▲
NOT ▼



U.S. Soccer

The big team lost to Mexico, and the U-23s fell in Olympic qualifying. The outrage is palpable.

THEY SAID IT



"I WAS DOING ALL THE MOVES YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO TRY BUT ARE TOO EMBARRASSED TO."

Joe Gillespie

Man who passed out during a beerfest at BB&T Ballpark, found the Charlotte Knights' Homer the Dragon costume when he awoke, and was arrested after an evening of drinking and dancing around town while wearing the mascot outfit.

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THE ALL-NEW
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CATCHING UP WITH

+

Joe Carter

How the former World Series hero got back in the game

IT'S OCTOBER, WHICH means it's time for the endless replays of Joe Carter jumping for joy after his World Series-winning home run for the Blue Jays in Game 6 in 1993, which is never far from his mind. "You're the first person to talk to me about it today," Carter, 55, said recently. "But that's probably because you're the first person who's talked to me today."

Not that Carter ever tires of discussing what is still only the second Series-clinching walk-off homer. "But I do tell people," he adds, "You know, I hit more than one home run." Indeed, Carter, a five-time All-Star hit 396 homers during a six-team career that lasted from 1983 to '98, and he led the majors in RBIs during those years with 1,445.

After retiring, Carter was a broadcaster for two years with the Blue Jays and then for two more with the Cubs, the team he reached the majors with, before being let go after the 2002 season. He returned to Leawood, Kans., where he has lived for 29 years, to spend time with his family: wife, Diana, a native of Kansas City, Kans.; and his children, daughters Kia, 33, and Ebony, 31, and son Jordan, 25. "The best advice I ever got was from Bobby Bonds," says Carter of his retirement plans: "Be in a position to say no."

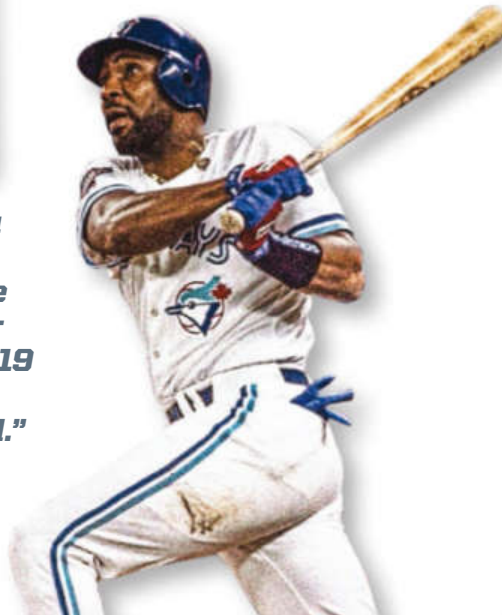


"The only thing I had a problem with was: All that my career got me when it came time for the Hall of Fame was 19 votes. It's almost like they forgot what I did."

✦ On his being dropped off the ballot for Cooperstown in 2004, his first year of eligibility

"He says, 'Oh, man, this is just what I need. Everybody looks like Joe Carter.'"

✦ On the reaction of former Phillies pitcher Mitch Williams, who served up Carter's title-winning homer in 1993, when he saw the ex-slucker's family at the Carter Classic one year



One thing Carter, who made an estimated \$47 million in his playing career, has said yes to is hosting the Joe Carter Classic, a golf tournament he's held in Toronto since 2010 that benefits the Children's Aid Foundation. Among the recent participants was former teammate Dave Stewart, who after becoming the Diamondbacks' general manager last fall offered Carter a job as a special assistant.

Carter, who worked from home, spent his first year back in baseball

doing a little of everything, including on-field spring training instruction and predraft scouting.

Carter has no desire to be a manager or a GM—"It's tough when you've gotta release someone or fire someone," he says. "That's not for me." He prefers focusing on the more enjoyable parts of the game, especially that long ago night in Toronto. "There's never been a downside to it," he says. "I am very fortunate to have those memories."

—Ted Keith



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MON

Rain-or-Shine
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Pimento Cheese



TUES

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WEDNESDAY

Smoky Hot Chops with
Cool Cucumber-Tomato Salad

Flavor front coming through



THURS

Perfect Day
Pork and Black
Bean Nachos



FRI

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SCORECARD



Katie Rainsberger | *Colorado Springs* | *Cross-country*

Katie, a senior at Air Academy, won the 5K Desert Twilight XC Festival in Casa Grande, Ariz., in 16:23.40, the nation's top time this season. The defending Colorado 4A champion and state Gatorade cross-country runner of the year, she also won the Nike Cross Nationals Southwest regional last November.



Vad Lee | *Durham, N.C.* | *Football*

Lee, a senior quarterback at James Madison, threw for 289 yards and three touchdowns and rushed for a school-record 276 yards and two scores in a 48-45 victory over SMU. Lee became the first player in Division I history, FBS or FCS, to pass and run for more than 275 yards in one game.



Karen Chung | *Livingston, N.J.* | *Golf*

Chung, a junior at USC, shot a 12-under 204 to earn medalist honors at the Annika Intercollegiate tournament at Reunion Resort Golf Course in Orlando. Her 54-hole score was the second lowest in school history, leading the Trojans to a 23-stroke win over Arizona and a school-record 36-under finish.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By ALEXANDRA FENWICK



Patrick Foss | *South Riding, Va.* | *Soccer*

Foss, a junior defender at Virginia, scored on a pair of free kicks—one from 40 yards in the 74th minute and the second from beyond midfield in the 89th—in a 3-2 defeat of Louisville. When last season's NCAA final went to penalty kicks, he converted UVa's third in its victory over UCLA.



Daly Santana | *Corozal, Puerto Rico* | *Volleyball*

Santana, a 6' 1" senior outside hitter at Minnesota, had a career-high 39 kills in a five-set victory over Louisville, the most in Division I this season. The second-leading scorer in the Big Ten last year (4.47 points per set), she was averaging a team-high 4.91 points and 4.41 kills at week's end.



Matt Miller and Journey Brown
DuBois, Pa.; Meadville, Pa. | *Football*

Matt, a sophomore quarterback at DuBois Area High, threw for a national-record 787 yards in a 107-90 loss to Meadville High; Journey, a Meadville junior running back, rushed for 722 yards, second most ever.

Nominate Now ▼

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to SI.com/faces.
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by DAN PATRICK

DAN PATRICK: *Who do you credit for helping you make the transition from college to the NFL?*

TYRANN MATHIEU: A number of people. Guys like [Cardinals CB and former LSU teammate] Patrick Peterson, [Cardinals] coach Bruce Arians and [GM] Steve Keim. It was a group effort to get me to believe in myself again. That was the biggest thing, to hold myself accountable and be responsible for my actions.

DP: *Did you understand what you were at risk of losing when you were in college?*

TM: I kind of understood. Thinking back to my LSU days, I wasn't mature. I couldn't grasp the concept that I was interviewing for a job. That was something I struggled with.

DP: *There's nothing that prepares you for stardom at that age.*

TM: Absolutely. I wasn't one of those big-time recruits. I didn't have the media following me throughout high school. To get to LSU, one of the best teams in the country, and be the best player on that team comes with a lot of risks and a lot of rewards.

DP: *So it's easier if you are a star in high school?*

TM: Kind of. I was basically an overnight celebrity. I



TYRANN MATHIEU

COMING OF AGE

With his sordid past behind him, the Cardinals' 23-year-old free safety is full of confidence and back to doing what he does best: picking off quarterbacks.

woke up one morning at LSU and I was famous. My life instantly changed.

DP: *And I'm sure the way people treated you changed.*

TM: Oh, yeah. Back then I had all yes-men around me. I had no one to tell me no. I was the guy in charge, and I had no one to answer to.

DP: *Do you like the nickname Honey Badger?*

TM: I love it. When I came into the [2013] draft, I didn't want people to get Tyrann Mathieu confused with Honey Badger. I didn't leave a good taste in everyone's mouth [as Tyrann], but people look at Honey Badger as some sort of superhero.

DP: *How do your fellow DBs react when you make a big play?*

TM: If I catch a pick, then everyone wants to catch one. We have this little game: Whoever catches an interception, the guys have to give him a gift.

DP: *[You have two INTs] so far this year, so what have you gotten?*

TM: I haven't gotten my gifts yet. I underperformed last year and didn't get any [gifts]. This year I'm healthy and feeling good. I'm looking forward to getting many gifts.

DP: *Does a pick-six like the one you had against the 49ers in Week 3 get you something special?*

TM: Absolutely. Apple just came out with a new iPhone. Hopefully one of the guys decides to bring that in. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Astros ace **Dallas Keuchel** told

me it's a mere coincidence that he started to pitch well once he grew his now famous beard. However, one fan has a problem with it. "Dad likes it," Keuchel said, "but Mom hates it. She'll drop subtle hints, but she knows it's probably not coming off anytime soon."

... Bears running back **Matt Forte** said many NFL players



don't have the league's rule book memorized. "There are a lot of rules," Forte said. "I bet if we did a test and asked players about certain rules, the total score would be like a C-minus." ... Rock 'n' roll legend



John Fogerty wants to dispel the

myth that he wrote his 1985 ballpark staple, "Centerfield," about Yankees Hall of Famer Joe DiMaggio. "I intended for it to be about Jackie Robinson," Fogerty said, "that guy rounding third and headed for home."

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L.A. Story

Coaching upheaval
continues at USC

BY PETE THAMEL

ON AUG. 22, USC coach Steve Sarkisian slurred his words, insulted Arizona State, Notre Dame and Oregon and shouted an expletive during a speech at the Salute to Troy, an on-campus booster event before the season opener. Sarkisian was pulled off the stage by a university administrator; in a press conference three days later to apologize for his behavior, he blamed it on his having mixed alcohol and medication. Sarkisian said he would not drink for the rest of the season, even while maintaining that he didn't have a drinking problem. "I'm going to go to treatment. I'm going to deal with it," Sarkisian said. "In the meantime I'm going to be the head football coach."

Perhaps predictably given that episode, the Sarkisian era ended on Monday: The second-year coach was fired a day after he failed to show up for an afternoon practice. At a meeting with his team on Sunday morning, Sarkisian was, sources told SI, "slurring his words" and "lost in his emotions." Athletic director Pat Haden told reporters that when he spoke to Sarkisian on Sunday, "it was very clear to me that he is not healthy."

Haden promoted offensive coordinator



Clay Helton to interim coach—but how the 3–2 Trojans fare under Helton is almost beside the point. The larger question is the future of Haden, a former Trojans star quarterback and Rhodes scholar whose five-year tenure as AD has been filled with missteps large and small. His handling of Sarkisian's situation was flawed and insensitive: It now seems obvious that he should have forced the coach to take a leave of absence and to get help following the August incident. If Sarkisian does indeed have a drinking problem, getting it under control while coaching would have been nearly impossible. "Even with all of the time and resources in the world and a 100% focus on sobriety, it's an extremely hard endeavor," says Aaron Taylor, a former Notre Dame and NFL guard who stopped drinking in February 2002

How the Trojans finish the season is almost beside the point. **Haden's future as AD is the larger question.**

after retiring from football. "Given what's required to coach in today's game, it would be easier for [Sarkisian] to start a technology company during the season than address [his issues] while coaching."

Haden's earlier mistake may have been his 2013 decision to hire Sarkisian, who was a Trojans assistant under coach Pete Carroll for seven seasons before holding the head job at Washington for five. Haden, who seemed intent on re-creating the Carroll years at USC, chose Sarkisian over former Boise State

BEYOND THE GAME

Sarkisian, who was 12–6 as USC coach, apparently has larger issues to tackle than football.

coach Chris Petersen (now at Washington). Petersen was widely seen as the stronger candidate. And on Monday the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Sarkisian's heavy drinking was evident during his days with the Huskies.

Haden's ham-handed dismissal of Sarkisian—the firing came less than 24 hours after he placed the coach on indefinite leave—fits a pattern. In September 2013, Haden, in the eyes of many Trojans supporters, waited too long to fire Lane Kiffin as coach. When the AD did finally make a change, after a disastrous 3–2 season start, he did so in the most awkward way possible: at 3 a.m., inside an airport terminal, when the team landed in L.A. after a loss at Arizona State.

For different reasons, the ousters of both Kiffin and Sarkisian were necessary. But in presiding over a coaching revolving door—Helton is the Trojans' fourth head man in three seasons—and handling the changes in command in embarrassing fashion, Haden has left himself open to questions about his own leadership. Few in college football doubt that USC will one day again be a national power. Whether Haden will be there to enjoy the new glory days is another question. □

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First, SI traveled to Eugene, Ore. to watch the hometown Ducks take on the Utah Utes in a massive Pac-12 clash. Ducks fans flocked to the Tailgate Tour to see former Oregon quarterback Dennis Dixon, who threw up the "O" with fans who had watched him lead a super-charged Oregon offense straight to his Pac-10 Offensive Player of the Year award in 2007. After filling up on ribs prepared by local hotspot Oregon Electric Station, Ducks fans had to

choke down one of the worst losses in Oregon history, as the Utes calmly marched into a feverish Autzen Stadium and proceeded to drop 62 points on a reeling Oregon squad.

With the Ducks decisively plucked, SI and Go RVing piloted a fully loaded RV down the coast to sunny Pasadena, Calif. to watch the UCLA Bruins take on the Arizona State Sun Devils. The Bruins came into the matchup ranked No. 7 in the nation, with a chance to jump into serious playoff contention with a win. Before the game, 80,000 fans partied in the shadow of the historic Rose Bowl, and the Tailgate Tour was at the center of it all. Fans tossed footballs at the QB Simulator, and watched former Bruin and



Former Oregon star Dennis Dixon looked on as Oregon fans ruffled their feathers and played tailgate games.



UPCOMING SCHEDULE

10/17: ALABAMA @ TEXAS A&M (COLLEGE STATION, TEXAS)

10/24: TEXAS TECH @ OKLAHOMA (NORMAN, OKLA.)

10/31: OLE MISS @ AUBURN (AUBURN, ALA.)

three-time NFL Pro Bowler Brendon Ayanbadejo reflect on his years in Los Angeles. There was food, games and plenty of college football spirit, and both UCLA and ASU fans walked away satisfied.

Inside the stadium, it was another story. The Bruins closed out a tense first half with a last-second touchdown to grab momentum and head into the locker room trailing by five. As the second half began and the sun dipped behind the San Gabriel Mountains, the sun set on UCLA's playoff dreams. Two quick touchdowns by ASU put the game out of reach, and a late UCLA rally fell short as the Sun Devils tacked on one more touchdown while trying to run out the clock.

COMING UP NEXT

The Tailgate Tour heads to SEC country next, starting with a huge clash between the Alabama Crimson Tide and the Texas A&M Aggies in College Station, Texas. The Aggies will be rested and riding a five-game winning streak to open up the season, and would grab control of the SEC West with a win over Bama. After that, SI goes to the heart of Sooner Country: Norman, Okla. The Texas Tech Red Raiders head to Memorial Stadium to take on an Oklahoma team chasing an elusive Big 12 title. When these two teams meet, they are guaranteed to put up points. If you see the Tailgate Tour flags flying at your favorite college stadium, make sure to join in on the fun.

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LEONARD FOURNETTE IS ALREADY CALLING

GAME'S GREATS. BUT WHAT DOES HYPE MATTER TO A CHILD

OF A LITTLE GIRL? / BY ALAN SHIPNUCK



SECONDARY SCHOOLED

Even at 6'1" and 230 pounds, Fournette blew past a pair of South Carolina DBs on his 87-yard touchdown run.

Photograph by
Pouya Dianat for
Sports Illustrated



YOU KNEW it was coming. For 30 minutes and 47 seconds South Carolina had done the impossible: contain Leonard Fournette. But it couldn't last.

On second-and-seven from the Gamecocks' 13-yard line LSU's sophomore tailback faked right then broke left to take the handoff. Fournette is basically a Lamborghini in shoulder pads, and by the time he was three yards past the line of scrimmage, he was nearing top speed. Waiting for him, in perfect position to make a tackle, was strong safety Jordan Diggs. In the first half in Baton Rouge last Saturday the 6' 1", 230-pound Fournette had pounded his way to 49 yards on 15 carries, tough bursts that may have affected Diggs's body, to say nothing of his soul. "Every time Leonard touches the ball it does damage, even the short runs," says Tigers senior offensive tackle Vadal Alexander. "Those four- and five-yarders take a toll—on *them*, not him. They're like the jabs that set up a knockout punch."

Diggs started to get low, girding to be smashed again. Fournette has a very sophisticated understanding of football, but he likes to talk about his craft in the simplest terms: "Everyone has a job to do. Mine is to make one man miss. Then good things can happen." Instead of taking on Diggs, Fournette broke to his right with a cut that was savage in its angle and abruptness. What happened next was cartoonish: Diggs didn't just fail to make the tackle, he whiffed entirely. As he said mournfully afterward, "I looked up, and all of a sudden he was in front of me. Then he was past me." In the split-second that followed, a full-throated roar of anticipation filled Tiger Stadium: The crowd knew. Two defensive backs were in position to stop Fournette, but he accelerated between them. With his 4.35 speed, the rest was a formality.

Fournette's 87-yard touchdown pushed the lead to 24–10, broke the Gamecocks' spirit and propelled No. 6 LSU to a 45–24 win. He played only one more series, leaving with 158 yards on 20 carries, which pushed his total through five games to 1,022 yards on 119 rushes—an 8.6 yards-per-carry average, to go with 12 touchdowns. The game-breaker against Carolina was merely the latest highlight in what looks like an unimpeachable

Heisman Trophy campaign, and it accelerated comparisons between the 20-year-old Fournette and the game's all-time greats.

South Carolina senior safety Isaiah Johnson likens Fournette's hard-charging style to Adrian Peterson's: "You have to get your mind right" to bring him down. He has the "unbelievable vision and physicality" of Earl Campbell, says Syracuse coach Scott Shafer, whose team surrendered 244 yards to Fournette on Sept. 26. Tulane assistant David Johnson cites Marcus Dupree, saying, "He's so powerful but so graceful—he doesn't just run through people, he runs past them, with ease." For LSU running backs coach Frank Wilson, Fournette conjures images of Marshall Faulk: "He can spin on you, he can hurdle you, he can give it to you and take it away, and then be gone in a hiccup." Or, as Vince Dooley, Herschel Walker's coach at Georgia, told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, "Fournette is the closest thing I've seen to Herschel."

Then there's Rickey Williams, who coached Fournette at St. Augustine High in New Orleans: "He's like Bo Jackson in that he's strong as a bull but also has that breakaway speed. Bo was like Herschel, a bowling ball just knocking over people. Leonard can do that too, but he's not a straight-line

**"HE CAN SPIN ON YOU, HE CAN HURDLE
GIVE IT TO YOU AND TAKE IT
IN A HICCUP," SAYS LSU'S RUNNING**

PURPLE POWER

Before breaking SEC records, Fournette inspired a doc as the nation's No. 1 recruit at St. Augustine (near right).

runner like them—in the open field he has the elusiveness of Barry Sanders, of Emmitt Smith. And he has those high knees like Roger Craig. But really his running style reminds me most of Eric Dickerson—big, strong, fast, but no one ever gets a clean hit on him."

To recap, that's 10 backs who won four Heisman Trophies, sport five mustard-colored Hall of Fame blazers and own eight Super Bowl rings.

Fournette is accustomed to hyperbole—he was the subject of a 55-minute documentary in high school—but refuses to embrace it. He has old-school tastes, citing Ernie Davis and Jim Brown as inspirations, but he avoids direct comparisons: "It's cool, but I would never say anything like that. All those guys are legends. Hopefully one day when I'm older, I can have a career like them, but for now I just want to be me."

That starts with being humble. Fournette is the first player in SEC history to rush for 200 yards in three consecutive games. After one of Fournette's superlative games coach Les Miles called him up in front of the team to





**YOU, HE CAN
AWAY, AND THEN BE GONE
BACKS COACH.**

name him the Tigers' offensive player of the week, but Fournette demurred, insisting the recognition go to sophomore fullback John David Moore—much as he regifted a New Orleans player of the year trophy to the quarterback at a rival high school because Fournette considered him more deserving.

If awards and accolades don't motivate him, what does? Fournette strokes his beard at the question; the scruff makes him look like a middle-aged man, an effect belied by a boyish smile that reveals a mouthful of braces. "I like the responsibility of so many people counting on me," he says, with some feeling. "There's only one ball on the football field, and everybody wants it. If that ball is in your hands, you have to take care of it like it's your baby. In that ball the whole of Louisiana is in your hands."

FOURNETTE GREW up in the 7th Ward, a hardscrabble part of town far from the bright lights of the French Quarter. His father, a delivery driver, who is now known far and wide as Big Leonard, was also a New Orleans running back, starring at Kennedy High in the 1980s. "He was bigger than his son and faster than his son," says Big Leonard's old teammate Theron Porter. "He was an animal. He should have gone all the way."

But Big Leonard's pro potential remains a tantalizing what-if; he never even played college ball. His son frames his father's unfulfilled athletic career as a homegrown cautionary tale: "People all over the city still talk about his talent, but this is New Orleans. He got caught up. The streets got him." Big Leonard ran with a tough crowd, including the father of the Arizona Cardinals' safety Tyrann Mathieu, Darrin Hayes, who is now doing life without

parole in the Louisiana State Penitentiary for second-degree murder. Big Leonard had his own troubles, which he is loath to talk about; that may explain why he didn't show up for a lunch appointment and was too busy for any subsequent interviews. Cornered after the Carolina game, he said by way of explanation, "I've been running." Then he excused himself, never to return.

Big Leonard devoted his life to setting his son on a different path. It wasn't easy. Leonard's mom, Lory, says their son had so many behavioral problems that he was kicked out of multiple elementary schools; Fournette would ultimately be diagnosed with ADHD. Football became a crucial outlet. In New Orleans the youth game is called "park ball," and Fournette, always big and nimble for his age, was a natural from the time he was six. He did a lot of his damage at Hunter's Field, an expanse of dry grass wedged between I-10 and the Claiborne off-ramp. In the *Hoop Dreams*-style documentary *Road to Stardom: The Leonard Fournette Story*, his park ball coach, Jay Smith,

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5



LEONARD FOURNETTE

tells filmmaker Kenny Chenier, "He was just knocking kids out. People from around the park would come over to our practices just because of the sound they heard: *Ka-pow! Ka-pow!* Instead of running away from the defense, he ran toward the defense. It was like target practice for Leonard."

Fournette was 10 when Hurricane Katrina blew into New Orleans. Seeking higher ground, his family took refuge in a downtown hotel. "There was looting in the hotel," Fournette says. "It got set on fire." His voice drops an octave. "I saw things no kid should ever see. I saw a man get shot in the head. I saw a guy take a watch off a dead man's wrist."

The family fled to an overpass on I-10, which was already teeming with refugees in their own city. For five nights the Fournettes—Leonard's parents, grandmother, older sisters LaNata and LaTae and younger brother, Lanard—slept on the pavement. Leonard ventured into the streets every day to scavenge for provisions. "I didn't feel any fear, even though there were dead bodies everywhere," he says. "We were just trying to stay alive."

AFTER THE STORM the Fournettes spent a year as exiles in Portland, Texas. When they returned to their broken city, Leonard was enrolled at St. Augustine, a beacon in the 7th Ward that felicitously sits on Hope Street. St. Augustine bills itself as the nation's only African-American Catholic school. Principal Sean Goodwin says 98% of St. Augustine's students—there are 640 from seventh to 12th grade—matriculate to college, and in 2011 it became one of the last schools in the country to cease using corporal punishment. "Me and that wooden paddle became well acquainted," Fournette says with a laugh. "I was doin' too much clownin'. My seventh-grade year seems like I got the paddle every period. Sometimes twice. But I needed that discipline. Keeping my slacks clean, tying my own tie every morning, making grades—all that changed who I am."

Yet Fournette brought such a ferocity to the football field that when he was 12 the other parents in his park ball league successfully petitioned to have him banned, citing concerns for their kids' safety. He played instead on St. Augustine's freshman team against boys two and three years older, punishing them like it was park ball. In eighth grade Fournette began working with former New Orleans police chief Eddie Compass, who devised a Herschelesque workout routine of up to 1,500 push-ups and 1,000 sit-ups a day.

"Leonard is a classic child of Katrina," says Goodwin. "These young men were sent away as outcasts. They had to fight to live, then they had to fight for acceptance. So of course they play with a chip on their shoulder. When they step on the football field, they have something to say: We're still here, we still matter. Leonard has never lost that edge."

By ninth grade Fournette was a knot of muscle weighing more than 200 pounds, and he earned a spot on the varsity. This is no small thing—the Purple Knights play in the brutally competitive Catholic League and boast a rich tradition that includes seven NFL draft picks over the last two decades, including Mathieu. Fournette was so intimidated he rushed for 238 yards in his first game. "But that's not the most impressive thing he did that night,"

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FOURNETTE'S FOREBEARS

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ERIC DICKERSON
Vision, acceleration

HERSCHEL WALKER
Size, strength

BO JACKSON
Speed, power

ADRIAN PETERSON
Cutting, hands

says Tulane assistant Johnson, then the Knights' coach. "We lost the game 59–56. Leonard got on the bus, and there was a lot of talking so he shouted, 'Nobody say anything, put your head down until we get home.' It went dead quiet, and that team had Trai Turner, who is now a starting guard for the Carolina Panthers. But Leonard was that kind of leader."

After four games Fournette had rushed for nearly 1,000 yards and earned a scholarship offer from LSU, thus beginning a prep career that has already passed into legend. He would ultimately pile up 7,916 yards and 88 touchdowns while also serving as the punter and placekicker. To hear Williams tell it, Fournette's talents were wasted in the backfield.

"He was a better receiver than running back," says the coach. "We could line him up anywhere, and he ran perfect routes. Great hands too." In crucial games Fournette also played defense. "If he wasn't the No. 1 running back in the country, he would have been the No. 1 linebacker," says Williams. "He loved hitting people, and he had great instincts."

Fournette takes particular pride in his football IQ, developed in part from obsessively watching game film with his dad since he was a preteen. At St. Augustine he often consulted with the coaches on play-calling and says his favorite memory was drawing up a counter play that sprang his brother, also a running back, for a crucial touchdown in a big comeback against Covington High in 2013. Of course, in that game Leonard had scores running, receiving and throwing.

As a senior he was the consensus No. 1 recruit, and the comparisons with Bo and Herschel were already flying. Fournette's final two schools were LSU and Alabama. "Everyone was going to Bama," he says. "I was raised to be different."

That was evident after a bitter loss to Rummel High in the state semis his senior year. He bawled on the field afterward and was the last player to leave the locker room. Waiting for him in the parking lot was one of his biggest fans, Derek Mercadal II. Deuce, as he's known, had fallen in love with Fournette watching St. Augustine games with his father, an alum, and earlier that year, with the innocence of youth, he invited Fournette to his fifth birthday party. To the Mercadal family's shock, Fournette arrived straight from the airport, having just returned from an all-star camp. He presented Deuce with a St. Aug jersey and stuck around to play touch football. Now, after the loss, Deuce was crying too. On the way to the bus Fournette stopped, scooped up Deuce and tenderly offered some consoling words. "At his lowest moment he had the empathy to comfort my son," says Derek Mercadal, a

lawyer. "That tells you everything you need to know about Leonard—about how much he cares for other people and his community."

LAST SEASON Fournette set an LSU freshman record with 1,034 yards and led the SEC in all-purpose yards per game (137.4), but it's a measure of the outsized expectations that his year was widely considered a disappointment. That belief began when he was held to 18 yards on eight carries in his debut against Wisconsin. The following week, against Sam Houston State, Fournette scored his first touchdown and then struck the Heisman pose, a disco move that was wholly out of character and for which he later apologized. "He was hurting," says LSU's Frank Wilson. "People were saying he was a bust, and he had only played one game. It was his way speaking back to the media: See, I can do this."

Fournette had struggles in other games—nine yards against Arkansas, 40 against Kentucky—that he attributes largely to spotty playing time. "The game was moving too fast," he says. "I couldn't keep up. I needed more reps."

By the end of the season he began to catch up; in a breakout game against Notre Dame he busted an 89-yard touchdown run and 100-yard kickoff return. "Everything started to slow down," Fournette says. With a chuckle he adds, "Now everything's so slow it's like *The Matrix*."

Many of Fournette's best runs begin before the ball is snapped. "So much goes into those few seconds," he says. "Reading the defense, understanding our blocking scheme and where the cutbacks are. Is the nose leaning one way? Is the 'backer cheating this way or that? Those



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SAVE THE TIGER

While he's ready now, Fournette can't turn pro until 2016, so his family is considering insurance.

little details can be the difference between a five-yard run and taking it to the house. You need to find the defense's weakness. After that, it's just instinct." Those instincts are sharpened by preparation. Fournette is known around LSU for his punishing workouts and the intensity he brings to every practice. This goes a long way toward explaining the undefeated Tigers' unexpected success. Says Moore, the fullback, "When your best player is your hardest worker, that has a big impact on a team."

Fournette's tight focus—on the next game, on a national championship—is his way of drowning out what he calls the "noise": the Heisman hype and NFL chatter. He would certainly be playing in the NFL next season, if not this one, were it not for the rule that prevents players from turning pro until they've been out of high school for three years. The downside of this rule was highlighted last Saturday by the gruesome season-ending knee injury suffered by Georgia sophomore running back Nick Chubb.

LEONARD FOURNETTE

Fournette's family is looking into an insurance policy but won't reveal the amount—whatever it is, it's not enough for a once-in-a-generation talent. On the series after his 87-yarder last Saturday, Fournette's left leg was twisted in a dog pile, and he limped slightly coming off the field. All of Louisiana shuddered, and though Fournette was uninjured, he stayed on the sideline. He still found a way to make an impact, consoling freshman running back Nick Brosette after a fumble and cheering wildly while freshman backup Derrius Guice rambled for 161 yards. "The only time I feel like a kid is when I'm on the field, having fun with my boys," he says.

After the win, on national television, Fournette expressed sympathy for the victims of the flooding in South Carolina, which had necessitated moving the game from Columbia to Baton Rouge. Fournette linked their struggle with Louisiana's after Katrina. He wanted to get the words just right so he wrote out a statement in advance and read it on the air. Fournette offered to raise money for relief efforts by auctioning his game jersey, but Miles immediately squashed the idea, fearing it would run afoul of NCAA rules. This left Fournette a bit mopey but then, two hours later, the NCAA tweeted its approval.

There was an element of slapstick in all of this, but issues of football and money are more urgent for Fournette now that he is a father, to nine-month-old Lyric. She lives with her mom in New Orleans, but Fournette spends every weekend with his baby girl, at the apartment he shares with Lanard, now a freshman on the LSU team. The brothers rarely venture out. "Everyone with a phone is media now," Leonard says. "Every decision I make affects Lyric and her future. I don't want to short her by making dumb decisions and jeopardizing whatever good things I have going on."

This might sound like Fournette is already worrying about his draft stock, but he offers a passionate rebuttal: "This is much bigger than football, man. Being a dad has changed me a lot. It's made me grow up. It's changed how I look at the world."

The many different roles Fournette fills were all on display last Saturday. He was just one of the guys on the sideline, but after the game, while his teammates mingled easily with fans and family, a state trooper led him through the underbelly of Tiger Stadium, to a remote exit that would allow him to avoid being mobbed. A trooper opened the back door to a sedan, and then Fournette disappeared into the night, lights flashing. He was delivered to his apartment, where he could be both a son and a father, playing with Lyric while enjoying his mom's home-cooked jambalaya, roast chicken and corn bread. Leonard eventually crashed on the sofa, watching football with Lanard and their uncle Corey Scott, offering a perceptive running analysis. He had little to say about his starring role in that afternoon's victory but lit up at the mention of his understudy's success. "I'm happy for Derrius," Fournette said. "That kid has a future."

There's no football player on earth who's future is as wide-open as Fournette's. "When I break out into open space," he says, "I can feel the energy of the crowd. I can hear the noise. But what I'm really listening for is footsteps. I want them to get softer and softer. I want to run so hard that I can't hear any footsteps at all."

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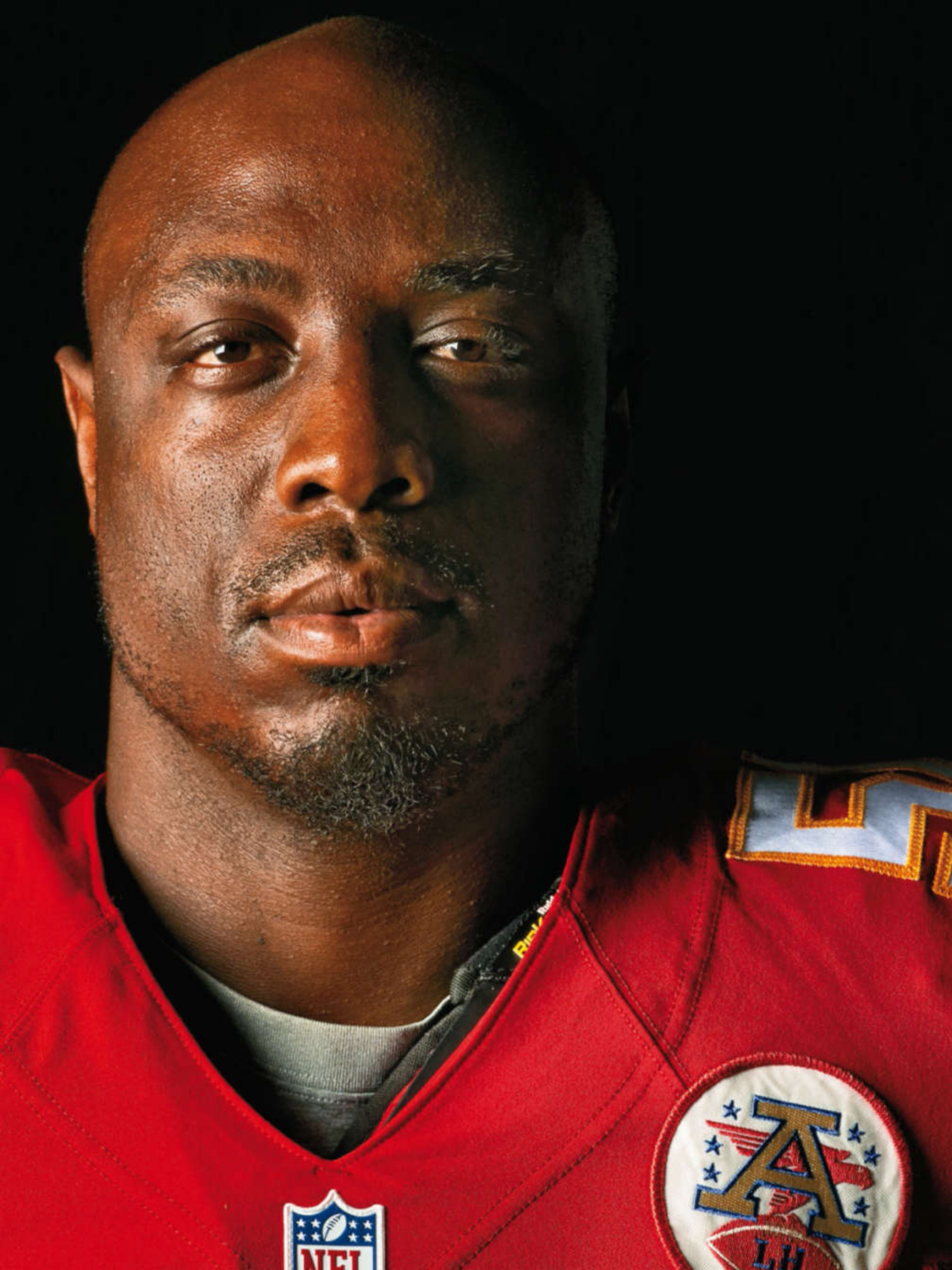
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MID-TOP SNEAKER



FIRE AND REIGN

JUSTIN HOUSTON IS BURNING UP THE LEAGUE, SACKING QBS AT A HALL OF FAME PACE. AS FOR LETTING THE WORLD KNOW HOW HE GOT HERE? THE LINEBACKER IS HAPPY TO LET HIS PLAY SPEAK FOR ITSELF

By Greg Bishop

Photograph by
Aaron Lindberg for Sports Illustrated



LET'S START with the fire. The day Justin Houston lost everything began like any other lazy Saturday at the two-bedroom house on Garfield Street in Statesboro, Ga. It was Oct. 25, 2003. Justin was in the ninth grade. That afternoon his mother, Kimberly, left him in charge of two younger brothers, and he sat them on her bed to watch cartoons so he could dial up a love interest.

Then the phone went dead.

Justin walked out of the bedroom. The door nearest to the den, as he remembers it, was engulfed in flames, with smoke billowing from underneath the frame. He panicked and ran onto the front lawn in his T-shirt and gym shorts, only to realize he had left the boys, Tylen and Aaron, inside. He turned around. "I couldn't see nothing," Houston says, "only smoke. It was dark inside. If I didn't know that house, I would have been in trouble. We'd been there for years. I could run through that house with my eyes closed."

So he did. Justin sprinted back inside, fighting through the smoke and flames, and found his brothers, who were too scared to move. He shepherd them outside. The clothes on their backs were the family's only possessions that didn't burn.

According to the Statesboro fire department incident report for case No. 23089, an alarm sounded at the station at 3:19 p.m. Firefighters could see the smoke from the firehouse, a mile-and-a-half away. They arrived at 129 Garfield Street four minutes later and, as they later noted, "found the structure completely involved." As in, completely on fire. They twice asked for additional personnel; it took eight firefighters more than two hours to extinguish the blaze. The report concludes, "The residence is a complete loss."

That record does not list a cause for the fire, but it finds that no “human factors” contributed. Houston says his family believes the blaze resulted from “some old wires in the ceiling” that sparked near the water heater on a wall in the other bedroom. The report estimates the damage at \$45,000 for the residence and \$15,000 for everything inside.

Afterward local churches helped feed and clothe the Houstons while they found another place to live. The family of 10—besides Justin, Tylen and Aaron, Kimberly has nine other children, six of whom lived with her at the time—eventually settled into a house about 30 minutes outside of town. Statesboro High and its football teams helped as well, according to one of Houston’s childhood friends, Jon Knox. But little was said about Justin’s heroics.

That’s the thing about Houston, the Chiefs linebacker who in July signed a new six-year, \$101 million contract. “He rescued those little boys,” says Knox, yet he didn’t seek any praise. He doesn’t share that story with many outsiders. His teammates say they’ve never heard it.

Houston says he never told them.

ASK ANY Kansas City player about Justin Houston and be ready for the look. Eyes downcast. Brow furrowed.

REPORTER: [Justin and I] talked for an hour.

DEE FORD, CHIEFS LINEBACKER: Really?

REPORTER: I don’t think the casual sports fan knows anything about him.

FORD: That’s exactly right.

REPORTER: Is he different in [the locker room]?

FORD: Justin is Justin, man.

REPORTER: What does that mean?

FORD: That’s a Justin thing. That’s between God and Justin.

There should be a website called *Justin Houston Facts*, a hub for learning about one of the NFL’s great mysteries. Of note: Houston is married to a lawyer . . . has a three-year-old son . . . is expecting a daughter . . . loves his Air Jordans . . . bears a scar on his chest from a cyst he had removed as a child . . . has a tattoo near the scar that says ONLY GOD CAN JUDGE ME.



HOUSTON ONCE SAVED TWO BOYS FROM A BURNING HOUSE? TEAMMATES HAD NEVER HEARD THAT STORY.

He’s a 6’ 3”, 260-pound All-Pro with 51½ sacks in 58 starts, but the only place he wants to stand out is on the football field.

In a world of needs-no-introduction athletes, here’s a star who requires one. Even Houston’s mentor, fellow outside linebacker Tamba Hali, concedes, “Outside of football, we don’t hang out that much.”

Houston enters a conference room at the Chiefs’ practice facility and folds his large frame into an office chair that wobbles under his bulk. ESPN’s morning blabfest *First Take* plays on the television on the wall, but Houston pays no attention. He doesn’t even look.

The first question lobbed his way is the same, always. *Why don’t people know anything about you?* “I don’t want the spotlight,” he says. “I see how other guys do it, and I know how I would like to do things.”

Which is to say, the opposite. Late in the fourth quarter of his final outing last year, against the Chargers, Houston notched his fourth sack of the game and 22nd of the season. He stood

BRONCO BUSTED

Houston savors every sack, but taking down Manning five times in six meetings has provided a special kind of thrill.

Takedown Breakdown

Justin Houston—who came within one sack of Michael Strahan’s season record in 2014—isn’t just the NFL’s sack leader over the past two years: He’s also already in elite company among all-time pass rushers. His sack total through 64 games compares favorably with some NFL greats at the same point in their careers.

1. **Reggie White** 74½
2. **Derrick Thomas** 58
3. **J.J. Watt** 57
4. **DeMarcus Ware** 53½
- T5. **Andre Tippett** 52
- T5. **Bruce Smith** 52
7. **Von Miller** 52*
8. **Justin Houston** 51½
9. **Dwight Freeney** 51
- T10. **Tim Harris** 50
- T10. **Richard Dent** 50

*ONLY 61 GAMES PLAYED
HALL OF FAMER
ACTIVE

half a takedown away from the NFL’s single-season record, Michael Strahan’s 22½ in 2001, but he was asked to drop into coverage on the last play of the game. He never complained, never begged for the chance to make history, an opportunity he might never have again.

Houston says he doesn’t see himself as famous. “This is my job, just like you have a job,” he says. “The only difference: They put my job on TV.” (Never mind the autographs, bank accounts, 62,000 Twitter followers. . . . Other than those little things, no difference.)

“We’re all human,” Houston says. “Some guys, when they do interviews, it’s all about them. Some guys, every single thing they do is all about them. I have a big family, so I’m used to everything not being all about me.”

COUNTRY. That’s how Houston describes his hometown, a city of roughly 30,000, some 30 minutes from the Georgia–South Carolina border. “Like if you’re driving in from Atlanta or Augusta, you just see cornfields,” he says. “That type of country.”

Statesboro is known for its university, Georgia Southern, and the fields of cotton, peanuts and corn that spread for miles outside the city limits. People go there to retire, Knox says, or they simply never leave. They hunt and farm, and they watch and play sports. The vibe is overalls and tractors. “It’s big enough that you can have some of the city opportunities, but small enough that you can hide and nobody knows where you are,” says Steve Pennington, Statesboro High’s football coach.

Houston is a football warrior raised by women. His maternal grandmother, Linda Houston, worked three jobs, house-sitting

JUSTIN HOUSTON

during the day and pulling night duty at a nursing home. She rarely slept more than three hours at a time, often in a chair. Justin’s mother had no steady male influence to lean on. She was strict. She wanted her kids home by 6 p.m. and in bed around nine. She wanted her rules followed without exception. “The whuppings I got,” Houston says, “I appreciate them now.”

His brother Demetrius, eight years older, was the nearest thing he had to a father figure. Demetrius pushed Justin into everything from sports to street fights. He demanded toughness. “He didn’t believe in raising no chumps,” Justin says of the second-oldest in his family.

Justin is the family’s sixth oldest—smack in the middle—but an outlier when it comes to size. He’s larger than any of his siblings, including his twin brother, Jared, who was born a minute later. That mass was evident early on in hands that looked like oven mitts and in feet so big that Justin’s brothers and sisters called him Flipper.

On Garfield Street, Justin recalls a life without privacy, a bathroom that never seemed free, a house that never went quiet. The siblings spent all their time together; the kids played hide-and-seek and video games and deemed the person with the most losses the Scrub of the Night.

Justin, despite his bulk, played point guard on the Statesboro High basketball team, bringing the ball up the floor. “That joker was a mini-LeBron James,” says Pennington. “He was the best 6’ 3”, 215-pound point guard you’re ever going to see. He could have played some college ball on the hardwood.”

In his other sport Houston started by wanting to emulate Emmitt Smith and Barry Sanders, to run away from contact rather than seek it. But from seventh grade, when he first played the sport, he was a defensive end—and from the first blow he delivered, he hit more like a man than a teenager. High school teammates called him Big Tomb, for the savage blows he delivered.

But Houston had not fully grown into his frame, so he wasn’t heavily recruited until after a state semifinal his junior year. That game, played at the Georgia Dome, pitted Statesboro against Griffin High and its future NFL running back, Bobby Rainey. Griffin ran away from Houston all day, but he stalked its backs across the field, and Rainey averaged only three yards a carry. Statesboro forced a fumble two yards from its end zone and made several fourth-down stops to win 7–0. The next weekend Houston and his teammates secured the state title. “Justin went from being this big dude, great athlete, to being basically the Incredible Hulk,” says Knox, a safety on that team.

Urban Meyer, then at Florida, offered Houston a scholarship, but Houston wanted to stay closer to his family. Then Georgia coach Mark Richt paid a visit.

JUSTIN HOUSTON

HOUSTON FOLLOWED Knox to Athens, a three-hour drive from Statesboro. They shared an apartment with two other Bulldogs, and that marked Houston's first adjustment to life away from home: There was *too much* space. He'd never had his own room before. "[At Georgia] we had to share a bathroom," he says, "but that was nothing."

He struggled that first year getting to classes on time (or at all), red-shirted, played sparingly as a freshman and was suspended for two games his sophomore season for violating team rules. He sometimes coasted during games, coaches say, relying on natural ability over technique.

Houston had gained 40-odd pounds by the time Todd Grantham was hired as Georgia's defensive coordinator in March 2010, before Houston's junior season. Grantham switched the Bulldogs to the 3-4 scheme the Dallas Cowboys had run when he was their D-line coach, from '08 through '09. He scoured his new roster for a collegiate version of DeMarcus Ware—whom he'd watched rack up 31 sacks during Grantham's time in Dallas—and saw Houston, big for an outside 'backer by college standards but typically sized for the pros. "I'll be honest," says Grantham, "I thought he was as explosive, or *more* explosive, than DeMarcus."

Houston welcomed the switch away from 4-3 defensive end. He still rushed the quarterback about 85% of the time, but now he did so from a more comfortable standing start, and he exploded even faster. Every morning he settled behind Grantham's desk, typed in the password his coach had given him and studied film—Ware and the Cowboys—until it was time for class. Whereas most NFL rush defenders relied on either speed or power, Houston saw Ware blending the two, making him one of the most feared defenders in the NFL.

That winter, after ESPN draft analyst Mel Kiper Jr. tabbed Houston as college football's top 3-4 outside 'backer prospect and the heir to Ware's throne (Houston had 67 tackles, 10 sacks and 18½ tackles for loss in 2010), Houston, citing his family's needs, declared for the NFL draft. At the combine he wowed scouts with 30 bench-press reps at 225 pounds, a 36½-inch vertical leap and a 10' 5" broad jump.

Richt would later say that Houston reminded him of another former Bulldog, receiver A.J. Green, in that he was both

private and supremely gifted. But he was also, it appeared, still maturing. Houston tested positive for marijuana at the combine. That, paired with college tape that showed him at less than full effort (which Grantham admits was a problem at Georgia), sent Houston tumbling into the third round.

Scott Pioli, the Chiefs' general manager at the time, called up Grantham, who alleviated his concerns. Neither

of them agreed with ESPN analyst Jon Gruden, who labeled Houston "the most disappointing guy I studied."

"I knew I had put myself in a bad situation," Houston

A BIT OF A STRETCH

Pro scouts saw Houston's 34½-inch arms and 20 sacks at Georgia and... passed? Now the All-Pro is making 31 teams pay.



says of having fallen all the way to the 70th pick (one spot before the Cowboys nabbed DeMarco Murray). "At that point, I just wanted to get after it."

THIS SUMMER, two years after John Dorsey replaced Pioli as the Chiefs' GM, Dorsey retreated to his vacation home in Door County, Wis. The cabin has no cellphone reception, so each morning Dorsey drove his white Ford Expedition north to Fish Creek and turned up a hill to the highest point in town, the Nelson Shopping Center. There he parked behind a hardware store and resumed negotiating a contract extension with Houston's agents. Each session lasted upward of three hours. "I had some moments," says Dorsey, "where I assumed [the store owners] must think I'm staking out the joint."

In mid-July the two parties reached an agreement that

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GET GREAT SAVINGS. HOWEVER,
GREAT TRIANGLE PLAYERS WILL
STILL GO UNRECOGNIZED.**

NOT THAT I'M BITTER.



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JUSTIN HOUSTON

guaranteed Houston more money (\$52.5 million) than any defensive player not named Ndamukong Suh. Those millions reflect the name of the hardware store where Dorsey parked each morning: True Value. In the opinion of Chiefs coach Andy Reid, Houston “was the best in the business last year.”

It’s difficult for anyone other than Houston to understate his impact. Consider the Chiefs’ Week 2 game against the Broncos, which Kansas City lost only after Denver returned a late fumble for a TD. Houston sacked quarterback Peyton Manning twice, batted down a pass and disrupted three other throws. He set the edge against the Broncos’ running game, and Denver gained only 61 yards on 22 carries. Houston rushed from the left and the right, from outside against tackles and inside against guards, even from the same side as Hali. “The most underrated part of Justin’s game is how *much* he does,” says Chiefs defensive coordinator Bob Sutton. “Unless you watch him play every game, you can’t appreciate that.”

That versatility is the result of continual growth. Early on, Houston asked so many questions of Hali, five years his elder, that the veteran ’backer finally said, “I’m telling you too much; you can’t have all my secrets.” Hali did, however, teach Houston the importance of using his hands to gain leverage on opposing linemen. He adjusted Houston’s stance, having him put more weight on his back foot in order to better explode off his front. Together they practiced the footwork required to drop into pass coverage. Says Hali, “Justin was more like a sponge than any other guy I’ve been around.”

Houston’s personality, his skill set and his versatility coalesced into a perfect fit for Kansas City. Chiefs fans are rabidly supportive but usually leave him alone when he dines out or hits the mall. He’s like them in that he defends one smoked-ribs joint above all others; in his case Jack Stack Barbecue. And in the Chiefs’ locker room—maybe the least flashy space in the glorified world of pro football—he’s found teammates with similar mind-sets, who respect his space and privacy.

Last season Kansas City suffered severely from injuries and health problems, starting with the Week 1 loss of two team leaders to IR and culminating in the Week 13 departure of All-Pro safety Eric Berry, Houston’s best friend on the team, for lymphoma treatments. (The Chiefs, according to Football Outsiders, had the NFL’s sixth-worst injury situation in 2014.) Houston visited Berry at the hospital roughly a dozen times (more than any other Kansas City player, according to

various teammates), and in the end—reluctantly but at Reid’s request—he stepped into the leadership void.

The Chiefs closed out 2014 with two wins in their last three games, finishing 9–7 but falling just short of the playoffs. After their finale, a 19–7 victory over the Chargers, Houston stepped before his teammates. He talked about the season and about Berry and about the potential that still needed to be realized, and he committed to a playoff push in ’15. (Although the

Chiefs have stumbled to a 1–4 start, they’re past the toughest portion of their schedule; their remaining opponents were a combined 23–28

GEORGIA ON HIS MIND

After Houston’s childhood home (below) burned, Statesboro rallied around the family.



“I’M TELLING YOU TOO MUCH,” SAID HALI. “YOU CAN’T HAVE ALL MY SECRETS.”

through Sunday.) “It stayed with me the entire off-season,” Dorsey says of Houston’s appeal. “It was that sincere. That heartfelt. That real.”

MINUTES AFTER autographing his new contract on July 15, Houston settled on his first purchase. He didn’t buy anything that might be considered stereotypical or lavish for a multimillionaire athlete. Instead he spent a few hundred dollars on the only thing he really wanted: a plane ticket back to Georgia.

News of the deal’s consummation had reached Houston near the end of yet another workout. He finished 45 minutes of abdominal torture, flew from Atlanta to Kansas City, tried to sleep, failed, drove to team headquarters, passed a physical and signed a stack of papers an inch thick. Next stop: the airport,

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JUSTIN HOUSTON

for a return trip. On board he turned his head away from his fellow passengers, focusing on the farms spread below the window. Even if his tears were joyful, he didn't want anyone to see them.

After landing he pointed his car southeast, toward Statesboro. He cranked the volume on the stereo, sang out loud and drummed the steering wheel with both hands as he lost himself in the moment. (His second purchase: a speeding ticket.)

Three hours later he pulled into his mother's driveway and met her and his grandmother at the door. They didn't talk for 10, maybe 20 minutes; they just hugged and cried. Then they retreated to the garage and told stories for hours: stories about siblings and sports and the ultimate middle child.

Houston is now known in Georgia and Missouri and, to some extent, across the country. Yet only a handful of people really know much about him. On the way to one of his sacks against the Broncos, TV cameras captured his face. He was smiling. And that better summarizes his thoughts on the 2015 season than anything he could say. Or *would* say.

His siblings are older now, deep into their own lives. Demetrius owns a barbershop in Statesboro. Another brother runs a cleaning business. One sister is going back to school to get her master's degree. Others are in high school or college. The youngest Houston is in eighth grade. Justin gives them all the same gift each Christmas: new shoes.

As he wrapped up his visit, he hugged his mother and grandmother one last time and shared a final surprise that he'd saved for the end. He had purchased two plots of land next to each other in Statesboro, and there he planned to build a house for each of the women: marble kitchens, hardwood floors, everything designed to their specifications—whatever they want.

That gesture will say what Houston cannot express in words. He will replace what his family lost. He will show how far they've come. □

BONE TO PICK

It's time to take context and other factors into account when we consider (and judge) interceptions

BY ANDY BENOIT

■ ON OCT. 8, on the opening drive of the Colts' 27-20 win over the Texans, Houston quarterback Ryan Mallett dropped back and fired a near-perfect spiral into the hands of running back Arian Foster. But instead of grasping the pass, Foster deflected the ball, which came to rest in the arms of Indianapolis safety Mike Adams. Interception.

Fact: The turnover was Foster's fault, not Mallett's. So why does it count as a negative statistic against Mallett? Likewise, why should NFL interceptions leader Matthew Stafford suffer the indignity of being picked apart on sports-talk radio when, for example, two of the Lions QB's three INTs in a 42-17 loss to the Cardinals on Sunday were not his fault. Like an error in baseball, an interception should be attributed to the guiltiest culprit, not

the man who happened to throw the ball.

Classifying interceptions in this manner would go miles toward changing people's perceptions of quarterbacks. Tipped passes are not the only contributors to misleading interception statistics. If you were to watch film of all 400-plus picks thrown over an entire NFL season, you would find that barely half were the explicit fault of the quarterback. The rest can be traced to, among other things, poorly run receiver routes, miscommunication between players (good luck assigning blame without knowing the play call), blocking blunders that affect a quarterback either directly (he's hit upon release) or indirectly (pressure forces a mechanically unsound throw), or situational circumstances. It's vastly different if a QB is picked

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FAULT IN OUR STARS

Blink before blaming the QB. As Mallett (15) and Foster (23) showed, there's more to a pick than the pass.

off on first-and-10 when his team is holding a lead than if he throws an interception on a Hail Mary or a desperate heave on third-and-long when trailing by multiple scores.

Then there's this: great defensive plays, which happen regularly in a league featuring the world's best-prepared and most-gifted athletes. Rams cornerback Trumaine Johnson's interception of the Packers' Aaron Rodgers on Sunday? Johnson simply made a brilliant diving catch on a quick pass in one-on-one coverage.

Of the interceptions that can accurately be pinned on a QB, most stem

from imprecise throws. But often those picks are presumed to result from bad decisions, which are far less common than football analysts might have you believe. Though announcers and fans frequently suggest that an intercepted QB "stared down his receiver," this doesn't occur nearly as often as is suggested.

Staring down a receiver isn't even necessarily a terrible thing. For starters, a quarterback needs to *look* where he's throwing; he's not a point guard dishing a no-look pass. And if he's working against man coverage, it usually doesn't matter where his eyes go; the defender is

typically focused on his receiver anyway. Only against certain zone schemes is a stare-down problematic. This is most evident on deep balls downfield, which often require the QB to influence the safety, steering him one way or another using his eyes. If the quarterback gets antsy and looks to his target too early, he'll lead the safety to the ball.

But announcers rarely talk about staring down on these deep shots. Generally, that bromide is reserved for intermediate passes, where throws happen more quickly. And stare-downs aren't even the cause

of most intermediate interceptions. A good number of those passes come off three-step drop-backs. With this quick timing, at such an early stage in a play, defenders are stationed where their coverage scheme puts them; their presence in a passing lane is largely a product of design. Much of the passing game is a function not of a receiver and quarterback beating a defender, but rather of an offensive design beating a defensive plan. When a certain route inherently defeats a particular coverage, it usually doesn't matter if the quarterback stares down his receiver or not.

Are there instances when a quick-dropping quarterback looks at his target immediately and guides an underneath defender toward the ball? Of course. Just like there are instances when the offensive design beats the coverage but a defender makes a heroic play anyway. In these scenarios, an offensive coach might tell his QB to be a half-beat more patient with his eyes.

More emphatic, though, is the defensive coach telling his guy, *Hey, great play!* □

FROM LEFT: RUDY HARDY/CSM; TROY TAORMINA/USA TODAY SPORTS





MLB PLAYOFFS

IT LOOKED AS
IF ACES WERE
MATTERING
LESS IN THE
POSTSEASON . . .
UNTIL THIS
YEAR. ALL THE
TOP CY YOUNG
CONTENDERS
MADE IT TO
OCTOBER,
AND THEIR
PERFORMANCES
WILL MAKE
OR BREAK
THEIR TEAMS'
CHANCES

BY BEN REITER

UP IN ARMS

Cy Young favorites (from left) Keuchel, Price, Greinke, Arrieta and Kershaw could define these playoffs.

Aces



Wida

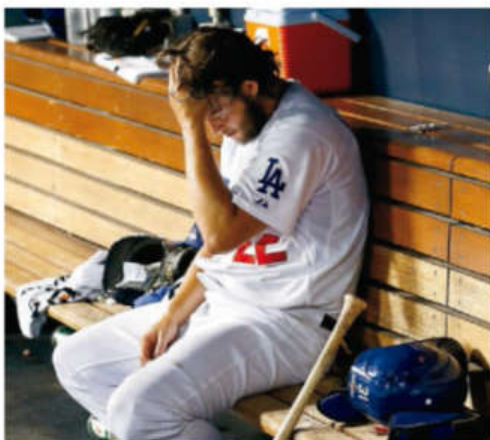
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HAS THE ornery, egocentric pitching ace joined the bullpen cart, stirrup socks and violent collisions (at home plate, anyway) in the dustbin of baseball history? It seems that way, judging from the dispositions of the three contenders in a National League Cy Young race that is virtually unprecedented in both its quality and its lack of clarity. Every vote cast will be both very right and very wrong.

Jake Arrieta, the Cubs' 29-year-old candidate, recently took the time to respond to a self-described #bitterbucsfan's Twitter query as to why he fiddles with his uniform so much: "My right nipple comes out of my tank top almost every pitch, so I place it back inside," Arrieta explained generously. The 27-year-old Clayton Kershaw, one of the Dodgers' pair of contenders, is a certified humanitarian, already the owner of a Roberto Clemente award and a Branch Rickey award—in addition to three previous Cy Youngs and an MVP—for his charitable work in Dallas, Los Angeles and Zambia. Zack Greinke, L.A.'s other leading aspirant, gets grouchy mainly about issues of personal hygiene. According to Molly Knight's new book, *The Best Team Money Can Buy*, the placid Greinke uncharacteristically aired a grievance during a team meeting in 2013. "Some of you guys have been doing the number two and not washing your hands," the now-31-year-old Greinke said. "It's not good. I noticed it even happening earlier today. So if you guys could just be better about it, that would be great." The only circumstance in which one of these guys would fire a bat shard in the direction of an opposing hitter would be if the hitter had a mugger sneaking up behind him.

If Arrieta, Greinke and Kershaw are altogether nicer than many of their sneering forebears, their performances have hardly suffered. Since 2000 just seven starters have had regular seasons in which they finished with an ERA of 2.13 or better. Three of those seven seasons were registered this year, and their owners will come as no surprise. Greinke's ERA, 1.66, was the best for any pitcher since 1995; he also went 19–3. Arrieta won a majors-high 22 games, against six losses, and his second half—during which he allowed a seemingly impossible nine earned runs over 15 starts and 107⅓ innings—pushed his overall ERA down

Even in an advanced statistical age, numbers hardly differentiate them.



JACOB'S LADDER

Kershaw (left) didn't pitch badly in Game 1 but was outdueled by deGrom (above).

to 1.77, the fourth best since '95. Kershaw's 2.13 pegs him as the ERA laggard, but his 301 strikeouts made him the first pitcher with at least 300 whiffs since 2002.

Picking a Cy Young winner among them is like selecting between a Van Gogh, a Rembrandt and a Vermeer. Even in an advanced statistical age, numbers hardly differentiate them—all are priceless—so the decision can only come down to feel.

It will be no help to the 30 unfortunate NL Cy Young voters, whose ballots were due at the regular season's end, but the postseason is giving as much as an extra month's exposure to the relative merits of Arrieta, Greinke and Kershaw, in addition to those of the fourth-place finisher on the NL ERA leader board—the Mets' Jacob deGrom (2.54), whose name actually sounds as if he might



OPENING SPREAD: DAVID J. PHILLIPS/AP (KEUCHE); CARDS ONE-AND-A-PART (PRICE); LEFT: GROSS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; KERSHAW: JEFF HOFFA/GETTY IMAGES; GREINKE: JEFF HOFFA/GETTY IMAGES; DEGROM: JEFF HOFFA/GETTY IMAGES



Cy Young Pick

This year's races are among the tightest ever. Here's how SI's **TOM VERDUCCI** filled out his ballot

AMERICAN LEAGUE



- 1 **DALLAS KEUCHEL**
Astros
- 2 **DAVID PRICE**
Blue Jays
- 3 **SONNY GRAY**
A's

NATIONAL LEAGUE



- 1 **ZACK GREINKE**
Dodgers
- 2 **JAKE ARRIETA**
Cubs
- 3 **CLAYTON KERSHAW**
Dodgers

be a Dutch master—and of the two similarly cordial leaders in the AL Cy Young race, the Astros' Dallas Keuchel and the Blue Jays' David Price. If it seems only logical that the league's very best pitchers ought to regularly lead their clubs into October, lately it has happened less often than you might expect. Of the past 28 Cy Young winners, just 15 participated in the playoffs in their award-winning season. The last time a Cy Young winner pitched in the World Series was in 2001, when both leagues' winners, the Diamondbacks' Randy Johnson and the Yankees' Roger Clemens, played in the Fall Classic.

Even if many of the game's truly elite pitchers have spent recent Octobers at home, conventional wisdom still held that the postseason was mostly a Tournament of Aces, and that deep playoff runs directly correlated with dominant starting pitching. That wisdom took a hit last fall, when, suddenly, playoff success seemed tied to endless, fireballing bullpens, such as that of the AL champion Royals. Just 18 of the 32 games played last October were won by teams whose starting pitcher worked more, or even as many, innings as the losing club's starter. Supporters of the Aces theory might point out that the World Series-winning Giants had the playoffs' single best pitcher, Madison Bumgarner. Not only did Bumgarner outwork his opponent in five of his six starts (and match him in the other), but he threw five shutout innings in relief—on two

days' rest—in the Game 7 clincher. Still, last season's playoffs suggested that the impact of an ace like Bumgarner might become an outlier, and not the norm.

This October? The Tournament of Aces is back with a vengeance. Of the playoffs' first 12 games, through Sunday, 11 were won by the club whose starter worked more innings (nine times) or the same number (twice) as the loser's. Last year five starters in six starts delivered as many as 110 pitches in a post-season game. With the first round only half completed, eight had already done so this year, including the triumvirate of Arrieta, Greinke and Kershaw, each of whom was intimately involved with his club's early playoff fortunes.

The bearded Arrieta went first, in the Cubs' wild-card-game matchup against the Pirates on Oct. 7. Even an irritated nipple couldn't stop him, as he rode a sinker that reached 98 miles an hour and a slider that reached 93 to hold the NL's fourth-highest-scoring offense without a run over 113 pitches. It was the Cubs' first complete-game shutout in the postseason in seven decades.

"It's sheer dominance, really," says Cubs catcher David Ross. "He's dominating the game every time he goes out there." To Ross, Arrieta's approach is simple: "It's not emotional," he says. "He's super calm, collected. He has confidence, and he expects to dominate the game, but he's not showing up the other team. He doesn't try to send a message. He doesn't throw balls up and in: 'I'm going to intimidate you!' No. He's just trying to dominate the game. That's it."

Greinke's first turn on the mound this postseason came three days later, in Game 2 of the Dodgers' Division Series against the Mets. The game will forever be remembered for Los Angeles pinch hitter Chase Utley's controversial takeout slide in the seventh inning, which left Mets shortstop Ruben Tejada with a broken leg and Utley with a two-game suspension (which he is appealing), a play about which the unassuming

ace declined to comment. "I'm sorry," Greinke said. "I don't really want to talk about it. I try to just not get involved in confrontation anymore."

One of the many lamentable aspects of that play was that it overshadowed Greinke's outing, which featured two second-inning mistakes—a high, 94-mph fastball that Yoenis Cespedes deposited over the rightfield wall in Dodger Stadium, and another elevated heater three batters later that Michael Conforto treated similarly—and 108 other pitches, over seven innings, of

three-hit, no walk, eight-strikeout brilliance. “There is really nobody that we have that we’re going to bring in that’s going to be better than that,” said Don Mattingly, the Dodgers’ manager.

There was, in fact, one pitcher on the Dodgers’ bench—and, perhaps along with Arrieta, the only other pitcher in baseball—who can regularly be relied upon to be even better than Greinke was last Saturday night. That was Kershaw, whose résumé makes Greinke’s, and certainly Arrieta’s, pale in comparison: Greinke has one previous Cy Young, and Arrieta none, and Kershaw’s lifetime ERA (2.43) is better than that of any other pitcher in history who has completed more than 1,500 regular-season innings and whose career began after 1912.

Kershaw, though, was unavailable, as he had pitched the night before. Disconcertingly, for both him and the Dodgers, he had been outdueled by deGrom. Even more disconcertingly, it was not nearly the first time that he had climbed a postseason mound and come away thwarted.

LAST FRIDAY, Kershaw became the 79th starting pitcher ever to make a ninth playoff start. When it was over, he remained among the seven of those 79 to have one win or fewer. His career playoff record is now 1–6, with an ERA of 4.99. Before Game 1 the southpaw was asked if his past playoff struggles would drive him this October. “I definitely remember, but it’s a new team, new season and hopefully for me a new outcome,” he had said. It wasn’t. Tweeted *The Washington Post*’s Barry Svrluga after Friday’s game, “Happened to end up in a Dodger Stadium elevator with Clayton Kershaw, who was departing. I’ve seen vacant stares before, but . . . wow.”

Contact High

In the age of the strikeout, the most reliable way to win in October is to score runs as quickly as possible

BY JOE SHEEHAN

Ever since baseball expanded its postseason to eight entrants in 1995, there’s been a push to figure out what teams need to do to win in a tournament that can stretch to as many as 20 games. There’s no easy answer, because no single approach to the game has had more success than others. Teams with great starting pitching, like the ’95 Braves and the 2001 Diamondbacks, have ripped

through October to titles. So have teams like the ’11 Cardinals, who repeatedly went to the bullpen early and relied on the offense to bludgeon opponents.

Perhaps the most persistent idea is that you need to be able to manufacture runs to succeed in October. It’s a seductive notion; cooler weather and generally better pitching produce a lower run-scoring environment, which

would seem to reward teams that can play for one run. However, that’s not necessarily the way it works. Assembling a run needing multiple events—a hit or walk to reach, a successful sacrifice or steal, a productive out, then another hit—is harder than ever because strikeouts have taken over the game.

The one-run strategies that we learned as kids don’t work in an environment in which strikeouts account for 20% of all outcomes and many relievers strike out a third or more of the batters they face. Strikeouts are now more common than singles. Burn an out moving a runner 90 feet, and often



all you’ve done is given him a better view of the two strikeouts that end the inning.

No, the way to win in the modern postseason is to score runs as quickly as possible, which means

slugging. If you get a base runner, you don’t want to use an out to move him over, you want him trotting home on a teammate’s homer or double. Through Sunday the team with more homers in a postseason

Kershaw hadn't pitched poorly by any reasonable standard—his box score showed that he had allowed three earned runs, on four hits and four walks against 11 strikeouts—but he had pitched poorly for someone who is nothing short of the best hurler of his generation. He had also once again run into trouble in the inning that has produced his past October undos, the seventh. Last year, in a pair of NLDS losses to the Cardinals, he allowed nine runs in that frame and just two in all others. In the seventh inning of Game 1 this year, which he entered trailing 1–0, he walked the bases loaded before being pulled for reliever Pedro

Baez, who allowed the two-run, up-the-middle single to David Wright that would provide all the runs that the Mets—and deGrom, who went seven scoreless—would need.

In conversations with several baseball people, both close to and removed from Kershaw's orbit, three explanations for his relative postseason struggles emerged.

1) *Sample size.* Kershaw has just happened to run into trouble in a few playoff starts in a row. "My answer is it's probably just noise and luck," says one rival scout.

2) *Workload.* Kershaw has averaged 222 innings pitched over the past six seasons. Though he has been in the majors for four years fewer than Greinke, he has completed 1,611 regular-season innings to his teammate's 2,094½. Arrieta, a late bloomer, has pitched just 795½ big league innings. DeGrom, who was born just three months after Kershaw in 1988, has pitched only 331½. Fatigue might repeatedly set in late in games after a long season, and especially on hot days: The game-time temperature at Dodger Stadium last Friday was 92°.

3) *Stress.* Kershaw's repertoire—a fastball that sits at 94, a slider that averages 89 and a curve that tops out at 77—is so filthy that on, say, a midsummer night in San Diego, he has no reason to deviate much from his preferred pitch sequences, which generally involve the hard stuff early in counts and the slow stuff late. Greinke even suggested as much before Game 1. "The thing I learned most from him is just if you get some good pitches, you can almost have the same sequence to where the hitters almost know what you're doing," he said. "But if your pitches are that good, they can't do anything with them."

In tense postseason affairs, though, in which Kershaw is usually matched up against an opponent's ace, the same sequences don't always work—particularly against some of the league's most disciplined lineups, after they've had a look at him two or three times that night. His latter two walks in the seventh inning of Game 1, against Tejada and Curtis Granderson, came after battles of eight and seven pitches, respectively. "It's Clayton Kershaw, the three-time Cy Young Award winner and MVP," says Mets outfielder Michael Cuddyer. "You're not banking on grinding it out and working him that way. But you're hoping."

The true explanation for Kershaw's scuffling is likely a combination of all three factors, and the Dodgers could only hope that he would find a way to overcome them. Baseball's playoffs remain a Tournament of Aces—perhaps more so, given this October's participants, than ever before. The winner will most likely be the club whose kinder, gentler ace carries it the furthest. □



POWERFUL CONNECTION
Playoff teams increase their odds by increasing their slugging percentage (like the Astros' Colby Rasmus, above).

game was 6–4. The team with more extra-base hits in a game was 7–3. Last year such teams were 17–8; the year before that, 24–7. Since 2012 the team with more extra-base hits in a postseason game is 73–24. You beat strikeout pitchers by getting the most value when the bat does connect. Postseason baseball is simple, really: ball go far, team go far.

The other way to counter strikeouts is by putting the ball into play. Since 2009, when K rates began to spike, the team with the better regular-season contact rate is 30–12 in postseason series. The contact-rate theory has correctly predicted a majority of

postseason series in each of the past six years and is an explanation for the success of the Giants over the past five years, as well as surprises like the '11 Cardinals and the '14 Royals. The '15 playoff teams with the best contact rates are the Royals and the Blue Jays in the AL and the Dodgers and the Cardinals—essentially tied—in the NL.

Forget what you've learned. In a game dominated by the whiff, the path to a championship is to score using as few swings of the bat as possible. Teams that can make contact have an edge in the strikeout era, and teams that slug better than their opponents win more games. □

WITH A SUNNY DEMEANOR THAT BELIES HIS HARROWING UPBRINGING IN KAZAKHSTAN, AND A FEARSOME CAPACITY FOR DESTRUCTION IN THE RING, MIDDLEWEIGHT CHAMPION **GENNADY GOLOVKIN** IS POISED TO BECOME BOXING'S NEXT SUPERSTAR

TRIPLE G FORCE

BY CHRIS MANNIX

Photograph by
Kohjiro Kinno for
Sports Illustrated

SEE THAT spot?" Gennady Golovkin points to a patch of sun-splashed asphalt at the edge of the driveway. "That's the best spot here." It's a brisk September morning in Big Bear, Calif., where the balmy Southern California clime waiting some 30 miles down the mountain seems half a world away. Here, at Abel Sanchez's gym, 7,000 feet above sea level, a sliver of sun escaping the shadows of the towering pines that surround the building is prime real estate. The sun. Golovkin loves it. Lots of athletes take pride in their physiques; Golovkin glows over the near flawless tan on his lean 5' 11", 160-pound frame. Last year he relocated his family from Germany to Santa Monica. In Big Bear, Golovkin has a spot on the second-floor deck, where every morning the sun hits a perfectly positioned recliner. It's not uncommon for Sanchez to arrive at the gym and see Golovkin stretched out, arms behind his head, a broad smile on his face. It's cute, as if Mike Tyson had a thing for manicures.

Tyson? Any comparison to the fighter once known as the baddest man on the planet is sacrilege in some corners. Still, Golovkin, the 33-year-old WBA middleweight champion, who will face IBF titleholder David Lemieux on Saturday night at Madison Square Garden, is a bona fide boxing badass, 33-0, with 30 knockouts. He has the highest KO percentage (91%) in middleweight championship history. He's blessed with power in both hands and the kind of pinpoint accuracy that amplifies

SEAT OF POWER

His work in the gym at Big Bear has helped Golovkin forge a record of 33-0, with 30 KOs.





the pain. His opponents will attest to it; it has been seven years since one has finished a fight.

Sparring partners, too. Golovkin doesn't try to hurt his partners; Sanchez—Golovkin's trainer since 2010—notes that the fighter aims for the arms and shoulders when throwing his biggest punches and that all of Golovkin's sparring partners wear extra padding around the rib cage. The champion treats sparring like practice—just as long as his partners do too. In '11, Golovkin was in Hollywood, looking for sparring at Freddie Roach's Wild Card gym. Peter Quillin, then a rising middleweight contender, was available. According to Sanchez, Quillin "got a little cute" with Golovkin in the first round. In the third Golovkin tagged Quillin with a shot that opened up a cut under Quillin's left eye. Sparring session over.

In 2012, Sanchez got a call from Clemente Medina, trainer for 154-pound brawler Alfredo (Perro) Angulo. Medina asked Sanchez if he had any sparring. Sanchez said he had Golovkin and asked how many rounds he wanted to go. Angulo goes 10 every day, Medina replied. Sanchez invited him up to Big Bear. On Monday, Angulo went six rounds; on Wednesday, five. On Friday, sparring had to be stopped in the fifth after Golovkin smashed in Angulo's nose through his face guard. Two days later Sanchez asked Medina if he was coming back. "F--- you," Medina said. "That Russian is going to kill my Perro."

That Russian—Kazakh, to be accurate—has drawn similar reactions from many others. Promoter Lou DiBella, after watching Golovkin stop Matthew Macklin with a rib-splintering body shot in 2013, called Golovkin an animal. Gary Shaw, whose fighter, former champion Daniel Geale, couldn't get out of the third round with Golovkin, declared Golovkin the best middleweight he had ever seen. When advised that Curtis Stevens, a recent Golovkin knockout victim, claimed Golovkin didn't have one-punch power, Derrick

Findley, a frequent sparring partner, said, "Curtis is full of s---. That's the hardest puncher I've ever been in with."

GGG, Triple G, Big Drama Show—whatever you want to call him, Golovkin is an iron-chinned, stone-handed force who in the wake of Floyd Mayweather's retirement has become arguably the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world. The only question is why, at his relatively advanced age, is the world just noticing him?

THE TWO men slid onto one side of a picnic table, and if you didn't know they were twins, or even related, you never would have guessed. One, Gennady, long, chiseled with a boyish mop of hair and a similarly innocent smile. The other, Max, shorter, thicker, with a shaved head and hard, steely eyes. Both experienced the worst of life in a former Soviet Republic; the poverty, the violence the relentless loss. In 1990 the eldest Golovkin brother, Vadim, a soldier in the Soviet army, was killed in action. A few years later another brother, Sergey, died, under circumstances neither brother cares to talk about. Both feel the pain of an unforgiving childhood. One smiles through it. The other seems to carry it, like a weight lashed to his soul.

Golovkin was born in Karaganda, a coal-mining town in the rugged moun-

tains of central Kazakhstan. His father, Gennady Sr., was a miner; his mother, Elizabeth, a technician at a chemical lab. The family crammed into a modest home in Maykuduk, one of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods. "Think the worst part of Detroit," says Sanchez. There, fighting was a way of life. Says Gennady, "The older kids, if they wanted something from you, whether it was cash or sports equipment, they would just take it. My older brothers used to say, 'If someone tries to take something from you, never give it to them.' So we fought all the time."

Sports became an escape. Not just boxing; Gennady excelled at soccer and basketball too. But the boy who beat back bullies with his fists eventu-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GREGORY PAYAN/AP; CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/KHORO KINNO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

POW. BOW

Golovkin (with Sanchez, below, and against Rosado, left) has trained to put on a bloody good show.



ally gravitated toward fighting with gloves. With Max, Gennady started training at a nearby fitness center.

Quickly, both brothers separated themselves from the rest of the group. "I don't know when it happened, but we both started to get really good," says Max. "The more we went, the better we got."

Gennady rose rapidly through the amateur ranks, winning a gold medal at the junior world championships in 2000; a gold in the world championships in '03 followed; in '04, Gennady, captaining the Kazakh national team, took home a silver medal from the Olympics in Athens.

Golovkin smiles when recalling his amateur days. Most of them. In 2005, Golovkin again entered the world championships. One more run with Kazakhstan, Golovkin figured, then turn pro. In the preliminary rounds Golovkin faced

Mohamed Hikal of Egypt. He dropped Hikal three times and appeared headed for another easy victory . . . until the judges declared Hikal the winner. The building erupted. Coaches sitting ring-side looked at each other quizzically, stunned by the result. Fighters from other countries rushed to Golovkin's dressing room to tell him he'd been robbed. To Golovkin, the explanation was simple. "At that championship," he says, "there were a lot of people who won who should not have. It was just wrong."

Something else bothered Golovkin. Absent from the stream of supporters flowing through his dressing room were representatives from the Kazakh team. No coaches. No officials. "Nobody from my team tried to defend me," Golovkin says. Representatives from Universum, a German-based promoter with whom Golovkin had been negotiating for months, were. They handed him a contract. Golovkin signed it. He went to see his teammates. *I'm going pro. Thanks for everything. Goodbye.*

In 2005, Universum was a promotional powerhouse. Its stable included world champions Felix Sturm, Sebastian Zbik and Jürgen Brähmer. It had a lucrative television deal with German network ZDF. Golovkin had high expectations. Early on, they were met. He made good money. He fought on high-profile undercards. He rose steadily in the middleweight rankings. But around '08, things changed. Golovkin was closing in on a mandatory shot at 160-pound champion Kelly Pavlik of the U.S. Golovkin begged Universum to push for the fight, which almost certainly would have taken place in the States. The promoters declined, citing a desire to continue building his profile in Europe. Golovkin asked for a fight with Sturm, then one of the biggest stars in Germany. Universum again passed. "They were more interested in building Sturm than me," says Golovkin. "From then on I didn't want to

be one of the German stars; I wanted to beat all of them."

In 2010, Golovkin sued to get out of his Universum contract. The company fought it, dragging litigation out for nearly two years. In '11, Golovkin became a promotional free agent. He made himself a promise: From then on, he would control his own future.

A **PHONE BUZZED** in Abel Sanchez's pocket, interrupting the late breakfast of a semiretired trainer. In 2011, Sanchez was all but out of boxing. Terry Norris, his prized pupil, a Hall of Fame fighter, was long since retired.

In '01, Sanchez, then working with Francois Botha, a heavyweight, and Miguel Angel Gonzalez, a lightweight, became frustrated with their lack of work ethic. So he quit. He built a vacation home in Big Bear and threw himself into his contracting business. In '07 he put the house on the market. While waiting for a buyer, he converted the garage into a gym. When word spread of a high-altitude facility, trainers approached him about using it. Sanchez picked up a fighter or two, but never thought seriously about getting back into the sport.

The call that day was from manager Oleg Hermann. He had a fighter, Gennady Golovkin, who was shopping for a new trainer; would Sanchez be interested in meeting with him? "My first reaction," says Sanchez, "was, *Who?*" A few days later Golovkin was in Big Bear. On a pair of training tables the two men watched DVDs of Golovkin's fights. Sanchez would pop up, hit pause and critique what he was seeing; Golovkin absorbed it all. Watching Golovkin, seeing the natural skill on film and hearing, through broken English, how his mind worked sparked something in Sanchez. "He had a radar," says Sanchez. "He saw everything coming at him."

The next morning Golovkin thanked Sanchez—and told him he would see him in two months. Sanchez didn't believe him. He knew Golovkin had been making the rounds. He was just one stop. Two

months later his phone rang again. It was Max Hermann, Oleg's brother. Gennady will be at the airport tomorrow, Max said. Can you pick him up?

Sanchez refuses to take credit for Golovkin's success. "Ray Charles could train him," he says. The trainer felt a rare power from Golovkin when working the mitts; in sparring, he watched a unique mind at work. A month in, Sanchez called Golovkin into a room. On a whiteboard Sanchez scribbled a list of the greatest fighters in boxing history. He put Muhammad Ali at the top. He left No. 2 blank. Names like Floyd Mayweather, Sugar Ray Robinson and Mike Tyson followed. "I said, 'Give me three years,'" says Sanchez, "and your name will be right there behind Ali."

A few tweaks were needed. As an amateur, Golovkin had been conditioned to punch primarily to score points. A "calm puncher," as Sanchez put it. In the U.S., the path to success is through exposure on HBO or Showtime, and neither network was interested in an Eastern European fighter who won by decision. Power took on added importance. That meant conditioning Golovkin to redistribute his weight from his back foot to his front. That meant regular weight training. That meant film study. "He was like a duck to water," says Sanchez. "Never complained. Did everything I asked."

Sanchez wanted Golovkin to become a predator. A power puncher's ability to cut the ring off is an essential skill. Sanchez showed Golovkin video of cutting horses sepa-

rating sheep from a pack. He pointed out how the horses anticipate the sheep's movement and get to a spot before they do; Golovkin needed to do the same thing with his opponents in the ring. Sanchez pushed Golovkin to expand his range. Most fighters target areas from the bridge of the nose to just below the rib cage; Sanchez encouraged Golovkin to aim anywhere from top of the forehead to just above the belt line. Many fighters slide side to side to avoid punches; under Sanchez, Golovkin learned to lean back, putting himself in position to counterpunch with power when an opponent misses. "He's not running from any punches," says Stevens.

"If he makes you miss, he's always within arm's reach to make you pay."

Fighting this way carries a price; to deliver big hits means being willing to absorb a few too. "I knew this," says Golovkin. "But to succeed in [the] U.S., I had to go for knockouts." He had to fight through adversity as well. In 2013, Golovkin was scheduled to defend his title against Gabriel Rosado. It was Golovkin's second fight on HBO and his first at Madison Square Garden. Two days before the fight Golovkin summoned his manager to his room at 3 a.m. The flu had hit him. His throat was closed. He could barely breathe. Golovkin's team told him he had to cancel the fight. Golovkin begged them to wait. On Saturday morning he told them he felt better. "No way was he 100%," says Sanchez. Whatever. Golovkin stopped Rosado in the seventh round. "He

understands that he has to make a statement every time he fights," says Sanchez. "A lot of fighters who have had the success Gennady has had wouldn't accept that. He's just a different breed."

BY NOW, MANNY PACQUIAO'S story is part of boxing lore. In 2001 the skinny Filipino wandered into Wild Card, a raw bundle of speed and power that Roach would mold into one of the best fighters of this

generation. But what made Pacquiao a star was who he beat. Between 2008 and '10 he picked up wins over Juan Manuel Marquez, Oscar De La Hoya, Ricky Hatton and Miguel Cotto, victories that elevated him from just another world champion to a box office attraction.

Golovkin is looking to follow a similar path. His promoter, Tom Loeffler, has purposely built Golovkin in major media markets New York and Los Angeles; Golovkin's last fight drew more than 12,000 to The Forum in L.A.; close to 20,000 are expected to fill Madison Square Garden on Saturday night. His HBO ratings continue to soar—Golovkin fights average well over one million viewers—and, against Lemieux, Golovkin will make his first appearance on pay-per-view. The hope is that a strong showing (150,000 buys is considered good; anything over 200,000 is a smash) will generate the financial incentive needed to entice the biggest names in the division (Miguel Cotto and Saul Alvarez, specifically) into the ring. Says Loeffler, "[Saturday] is paramount for his career."

It's a fact not lost on Golovkin. Titles. Exposure. A chance to test his skills against the best. For so long, this was all he wanted. As he shuffles in and out of the flickering sun, an onlooker suggests this fight will be his biggest yet. "I hope so," Golovkin says. Then he's gone, back to the gym, back to work. The journey from the Kazakh streets to amateur glory, from anonymous world champion to burgeoning U.S. star has been a long one. But it's not over yet. □



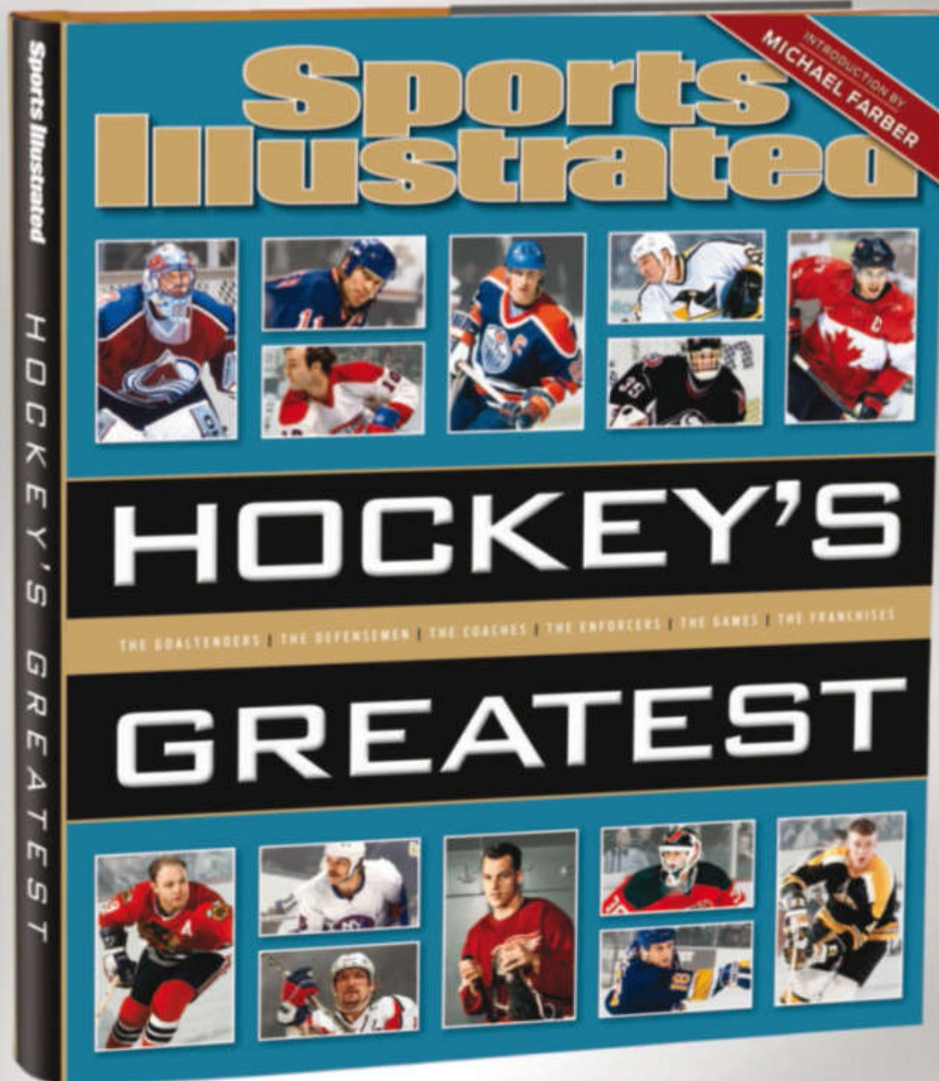
"GIVE ME THREE YEARS," SANCHEZ TOLD GOLOVKIN WHEN HE BEGAN TRAINING HIM, IN 2011, "AND YOUR NAME WILL BE RIGHT THERE BEHIND ALI."



IN HIS CORNER
A boxer himself in Kazakhstan, Max keeps an eye on Gennady's career in the U.S.

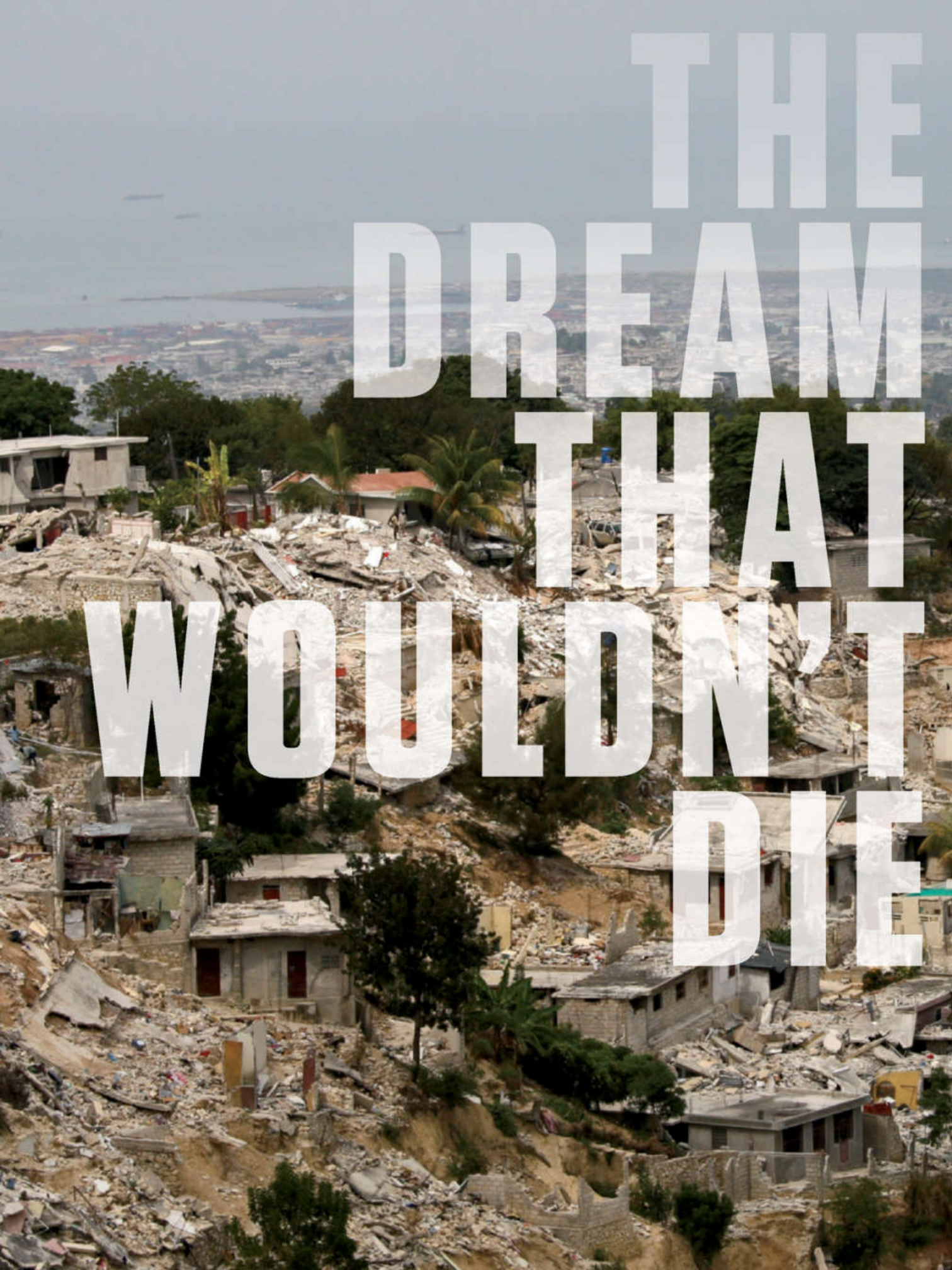
THE HOTTEST ON ICE

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THE
DREAM
THAT
WOULDN'T
DIE

BY LUKE WINN

The 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti also put Kentucky freshman **Skal Labissiere** on a path to become his nation's most celebrated basketball export

**FROM
RUINS, HOPE**

Labissiere moved to the U.S. shortly after his home was one of the nearly 300,000 that were damaged or destroyed.

Photograph by
Hollis Bennett for
Sports Illustrated

DARIO LOPEZ-MILLS/AP (LEFT)



IT WAS LIKE A VISION,

he says, when a wall of his family's third-floor apartment split wide-open, and before him in the late-afternoon light flashed their Port-au-Prince neighborhood, Canapé Vert. Inside and outside were merging, and then everything was caving in. In the violent rumbling of a 7.0 magnitude earthquake that began at 4:53 p.m. on Jan. 12, 2010, and ravaged the Haitian capital, he was descending. Three stories became one pile of concrete, rebar, walls and possessions. The light disappeared.

At first, Skäl Labissiere could only hear, which at least meant he was alive. His nine-year-old brother, Elliott, was crying out, which meant he was alive too. Their mother, Ema, was nearby—the three of them had run into the living room when the tremors started—saying prayers to get right with God, which meant she was alive but maybe not expecting to be for long.

Skäl tried to get right with God too but became upset. “I’m 13,” he yelled to his mother. “I’m not old enough to die.”

“We die at any age,” she replied. “This is life.”

Skäl didn’t like that answer. He’d been taught that it was O.K. to pray for outcomes, and what he’d prayed for most was to move to the U.S. to play basketball. On clear days from the Labissieres’ apartment, located between the National Palace, downtown, and the wealthier homes of Pétiön-ville, he could look a few miles south to the ridge of Boutilier mountain, the green trees interrupted by a cluster of antennas and dishes—the hardware that relayed images of the NBA to Haiti, and to the eyes of a boy in the Western Hemisphere’s poorest nation, home to 10.3 million people and not a single hardwood basketball court.

There was little he could see now. Not the mountain; not the second-floor neighbor boy, dead and buried well below; not his father, Lesly, who had been in the courtyard after returning from work. There was no earthly way Skäl could have ever seen that this calamity was his way out of Haiti—that in this life, which guarantees no fairness in its outcomes, an earthquake that killed more than 100,000 would also fast-track him to the U.S., where over the next five years he would develop into the top-ranked recruit in the class of 2015, a 6’ 11½” power forward navigating different kinds of chaos on his way to the 2016 NBA draft.

A fallen wall pressed on his back and forced him into a painful crouch, butt over heels, elbows over knees. He could hear people screaming outside. He prayed in a small, slanted space, trying not to choke in the dusty darkness.

SKÄL LABISSIERE begins his days in the black pre-dawn. On a Friday in June, outside a YMCA in Olive Branch, Miss., a suburb southeast of Memphis, there is no wind to muffle the wake-up chirping of the birds. Beyond a chain-link fence, the surface of the outdoor pool-slash-waterpark is a mirror, reflecting the Y’s exterior lights. The interior lights flicker to life just before opening time,

A fallen wall pressed on his back and forced him into a painful crouch. He could hear people screaming outside.



Hitting a Wall Labissiere had a comfortable life in Port-au-Prince, but his hoops options were limited.

5 a.m. At 5:04, a gray Chevy Avalanche pickup truck pulls into the parking lot.

Andreus Shannon, a skills trainer, and his 19-year-old student emerge. The student is long and slender, with the beginnings of an Afro atop a high forehead; he has a gentle smile and skin at least one shade of brown lighter than he had as a young boy, when he played soccer for hours under the Hispaniola sun. On his feet are the red Nike Hyperdunks that he received last April while starring in Portland at the swoosh-sponsored Hoop Summit, as the lone player with HAITI on his jersey. His shoes are already tied tight.

The kid checking him into the gym asks, “When you heading to Kentucky?”

“Less than a week,” Labissiere replies, smiling.

“They say you’re gonna be a starter.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Hey, do me a favor. When you play Carolina, don’t beat ’em.”

Labissiere (*La-BISS-ee-air*) laughs and dribbles down the hallway, declining to promise mercy in a possible NCAA tournament meeting with North Carolina, one of the favorites to win the 2016 national title—along with Kentucky. He is indeed expected to start this season, the next big thing in a frontcourt that has produced 10 first-



round picks in the last six NBA drafts, but none with a road to Lexington like Labissiere's.

He and Shannon have the court all to themselves. The only competing noise is the buzzing of halogen lights. A one-handed shot from the right block goes up at 5:13 a.m., the first in a progression that eventually takes Labissiere beyond the three-point line, with steady commentary. "Bring your arm like this," Shannon says after a baseline misfire, mimicking a fully extended follow-through. "Remember to lock your elbow." These corrections are minor; Labissiere is an impressive shooter for his size, with a fluid release and high arc. It's evident why many pro scouts have him atop their 2016 draft boards: He has a LaMarcus Aldridge-like offensive ceiling—as an athletic stretch-four who can shoot and run the floor—with the rim-protection instincts and agility to make up for a wingspan that's considered just average . . . at 7' 2".

Labissiere has been doing these workouts for three years, ever since his American guardian, Gerald Hamilton, watched local star Torri Lewis win a three-point contest and vowed to get whoever was training her to train Labissiere. Lewis is typically at the Y around 5 a.m. too, but she left for Ole Miss on a basketball scholarship a few weeks earlier, and Labissiere, on the verge of departure for Kentucky, feigns concern for Shannon. "What are you going to do now?" Labissiere asks in the lilting English he

has worked so hard to master, after arriving in the U.S. speaking only French and Haitian Creole. "Are you going to cry today?"

Shannon holds back his tears, but he will miss a kid he's never had to motivate. "Two years ago," Shannon recalls, "Skal told me, 'People talk like I've already made it, like I'm going to go to the league. What people don't realize is, I haven't made it, and that's not what my goal is. I don't just want to make it to the NBA, I want to be a Hall of Famer, the best of the best.'"

That goal has Labissiere doing multiple workouts before 11 a.m. At the second, with his strength-and-conditioning coach, Raheem Shabazz, Labissiere does seated, plyometric box jumps under a scalding sun. According to Shabazz, when Kentucky coach John Calipari made his official recruiting visit in September 2014, he took video of Labissiere leaping from a seated position on an 18-inch box and landing on a 36-inch box, and sent it to the Wildcats' strength coach, asking, "Can any of our guys, right now, do this?"

The response: "HELL, NO."

Today, when Labissiere sets a personal best of 46½ inches, Shabazz exclaims, "F--- you, J.J. Watt! You do yours standing up"—for those unversed in the oeuvre of YouTube box jumpers, the ultimate video depicts the freakish Texans defensive end landing a 61-inch jump—"but Skal does it sitting down!"

As Labissiere stands atop the boxes, a vista of an undeveloped cul-de-sac is there to savor. The box conqueror of mid-South suburbia, via Haiti, declines to take in the view. He descends, carefully, and gets ready to jump again.

LIGHTNING SLASHES the early-evening August sky, off in the lowland closer to the ocean. Traffic sputters along Avenue Delmas—Chinese motorbikes, tropically painted pickup trucks called tap-taps (that function as buses, with bench seating in their cabs), white trucks with UN painted on their hoods, all dodging human overflow from the sidewalks. Smoke from a street vendor's cooking fire creeps over the eight-foot concrete walls of Quisqueya Christian, a prep school whose grounds hide one of Port-au-Prince's best basketball courts, a grid of blue plastic tiles atop asphalt. A game of two on two is in progress under the lights. Past the baseline there are empty bleachers and a beige wall—significant because it's the backdrop of an artifact. "That," says Jasson Valbrun, a former point guard at Labissiere's old school (College Canado-Haitien) who is now the commissioner of Port-au-Prince's interscholastic league, "is where the picture was taken. Skal and Titanic."

The last known photo of Labissiere before the earthquake dates from Dec. 9, 2009. His Canado-Haitian academic uniform, a white, short-sleeve button-down with epaulets, hangs loose from his bony shoulders. He is a wisp. Next to him is Pierre Valmera, whose boat-sized feet inspired his nickname. He grew to a wide-bodied 6' 8" and, from '03–04 through '06–07, was part of a succession of Haitians who played for Union University, an NAIA school in Jackson, Tenn. While on a break from a pro season in Switzerland, Valmera was laying groundwork for a foundation he'd eventually call POWERForward Interna-

tional, collecting contact info for Haitians worthy of invites to local camps—Labissiere had been nominated by his coach at Canado—and maybe recommendations to U.S. colleges.

Labissiere, deducing that Valmera was his best shot at playing in the U.S., followed up with a Facebook message on Dec. 26, 2009. Valmera phoned Labissiere's father during the second week of January, just days before the earthquake, but Valmera had never helped anyone younger than 18 get to the States, and Labissiere felt there was little chance his parents would allow him to be the first. They were protective, and had carved out a disciplined, stable existence for their kids amid Port-au-Prince's third-world poverty: Ema was a kindergarten principal and radio journalist, Lesly a carpenter who doled out whoopings if his boys stepped out of line, telling them they weren't allowed to cry. "My father would not have sent me off to live with some strangers," Skal says. "It's not like I was living in a bad situation."

Until the earthquake, that is—which Skal survived due to a streak of fortunate events, a streak that continued even after he was pulled out of the rubble. When the apartment building fell, a computer desk bore much of the weight of the wall that was pressing against Skal's back. Lesly had built furniture for the apartment, sturdy wooden pieces, including the boys' bunk bed—and that desk. It is possible that his craftsmanship kept his son from being flattened.

At the time of the quake, Lesly was lingering in the courtyard, trying to straighten the Fisher-Price hoop that his boys had dunked out of whack. After the building collapsed, and with the help of neighbors, he began excavating, carefully, with the one tool he could find: a weightlifting bar. It took three hours to dig his family out, and although Skal's painful crouch left him unable to walk at first, he was back on his feet in two weeks, thanks to his mother's consistent massaging of his leg muscles.

By then the Labissieres, like many survivors, were living in a tent. It was pitched just outside Ema's kindergarten, where some facilities still functioned. But Skal's school, Canado-Haitien—four stories of brutalist concrete in Canapé Vert—had been destroyed. With his life and education in disarray, his parents were receptive to alternative living arrangements.

Or as Gerald Hamilton puts it, "That's when the Lord sent the little chubby guy—that's me—to come get [Skal]." Shortly after the earthquake, Valmera was contacted by Hamilton, an information technology specialist from Olive Branch who had learned about Union's connections to Haiti. A basketball junkie and church youth-group leader, Hamilton says he became fascinated, a decade ago, by a story he read about a Sudanese refugee who was playing basketball, and tried, unsuccessfully, to offer guardianship. "He never got that idea out of his system," says Hamilton's wife, Sheneka, and in 2009 they received 501(c)(3) status for a charity, Reach Your Dream, which aims to help disadvantaged international athletes. By February 2010, with Valmera's help, Hamilton was working on a plan to bring two Haitian prospects—Labissiere and Samuel Jean-Gilles, a 6' 2", 17-year-old guard—to live with his family and



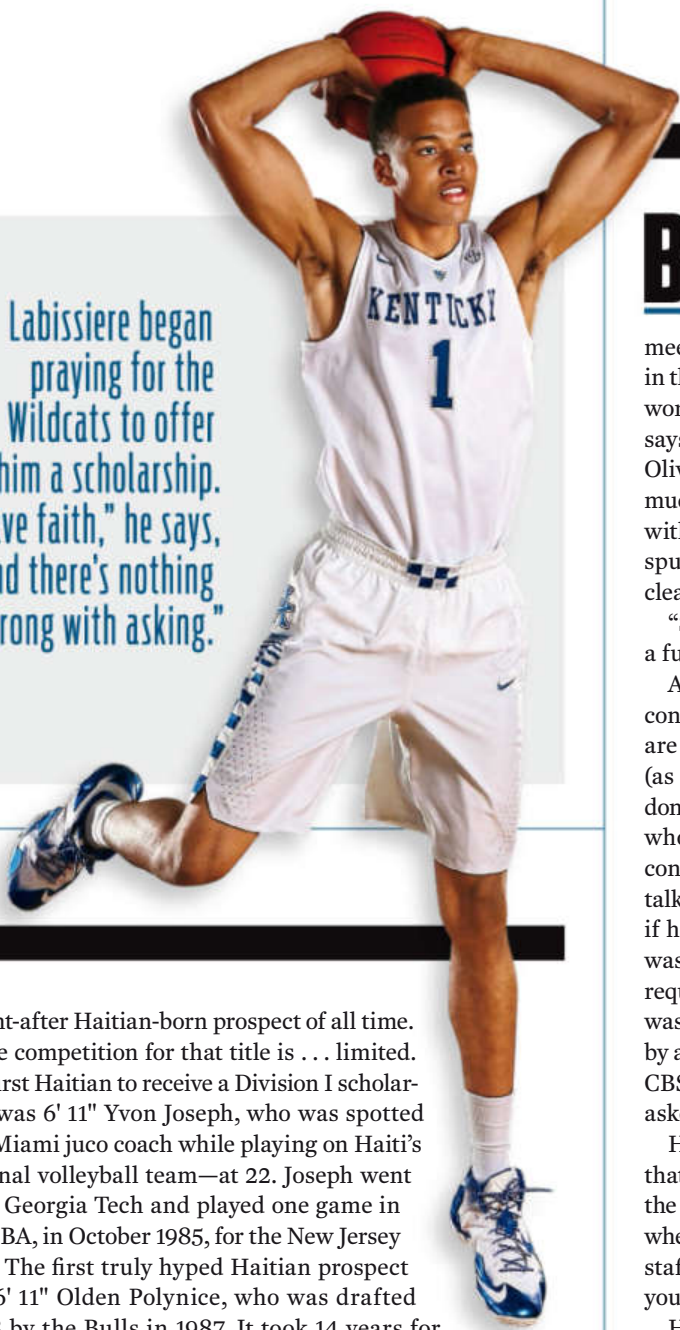
Airing It Out With 11 points and 12 rebounds in just 19 minutes, Labissiere starred at the Jordan Brand Classic.

attend Evangelical Christian School in nearby Cordova, Tenn.

In July 2010, on their second trip to the U.S. embassy in Haiti—after Hamilton flew to Port-au-Prince to meet the boys' families and provide documentation about ECS—the two teens were approved for visas. In August they flew from Port-au-Prince to Miami, then Dallas, then Memphis, where they were picked up by the Hamiltons. Labissiere was the less-advanced player of the two, but it soon became clear he was the bigger prospect: At his first national showcase, the Fab Frosh Camp in Atlanta in July 2011, he was named MVP. Recruiting letters followed, first from Detroit, then Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina. Labissiere was unbothered that most of them misspelled his first name "Skai."

Labissiere became fluent in English and fell in love with college hoops while following Kentucky's 2012 national title team on TV. As he watched ESPN's late-2012 Kentucky All-Access show, which included Nerlens Noel, a center with Haitian parents, Labissiere began praying for the Wildcats to offer him a scholarship. "I have faith, and there's nothing wrong with asking," Labissiere says. "And literally three or four weeks later, [Calipari] comes to my first game as a sophomore and then calls and offers me."

Calipari told Labissiere that he could be the next in the coach's line of athletic, rangy big men he'd groomed for the NBA: Marcus Camby at UMass, Anthony Davis and Noel at Kentucky. Labissiere was proud to hear that, but he did not commit right away. He subsequently became one of the hottest attractions on the recruiting trail and the most



Labissiere began praying for the Wildcats to offer him a scholarship. "I have faith," he says, "and there's nothing wrong with asking."

sought-after Haitian-born prospect of all time.

The competition for that title is . . . limited. The first Haitian to receive a Division I scholarship was 6' 11" Yvon Joseph, who was spotted by a Miami juco coach while playing on Haiti's national volleyball team—at 22. Joseph went on to Georgia Tech and played one game in the NBA, in October 1985, for the New Jersey Nets. The first truly hyped Haitian prospect was 6' 11" Olden Polynice, who was drafted No. 8 by the Bulls in 1987. It took 14 years for another Haitian to be drafted, when the 76ers took 6' 11" Samuel Dalembert at No. 26. The Seton Hall product, who went to high school in Elizabeth, N.J., is the nation's only active player in the NBA.

None of the Haitians who played at Union over the past decade were NBA (or even D-I) prospects, but they still relished the opportunity. "What Pierre told me before I went," says Antoine Joseph, 25, who followed Valmera at Union, "was 'Don't break the chain.'"

In the summer of 2014, Joseph got an indication that Labissiere would be more than another link in the chain. Joseph and Valmera were visiting Las Vegas to check on POWERForward camp alums playing in AAU tournaments. "All these big-time college coaches, guys I'd only seen on TV before, were looking for Skal, saying, 'What court is he on?'" says Joseph. "As a Haitian, I was proud. Skal had been this tall kid with a little talent, and he transferred all his energy and talents into a bomb. He just blew up."

BLOW UP like Labissiere has, in the high-stakes market of American youth basketball, and sometimes you become a controversial prospect even without being a controversial person. It is hard to square the Labissiere one meets—he says "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" to elders; does chores in the Hamiltons' two-story, brick home in a quiet subdivision; works as a janitor at their church; has no driver's license; and says, without any hint of lament, "Even though I've been [in Olive Branch] for five years, I don't get out of the house that much, unless it's to go to school, the gym, church, or hang out with family"—with the tone of a recruiting narrative that has spun out of his control and has him still waiting on NCAA clearance to play at Kentucky.

"Skal is a very good kid," says Valmera. "He's just around a funny situation."

At the center of this situation is Gerald Hamilton and the conflicting opinions over whether he and Reach Your Dream are doing the Lord's work of bettering a student-athlete's life (as he and Labissiere assert) or using a prospect to leverage donations to a 501(c)(3) charity. According to one college coach who recruited Labissiere, but did not sign him, Hamilton controlled access to the extent that "you were not allowed to talk to Skal, and the only way you could know he liked you was if he liked your Instagrams." The coach also told SI that he was asked by an NCAA investigator, in 2015, if Hamilton had requested money for Reach Your Dream. (The coach's answer was no.) This came in the wake of a November 2014 allegation by a former Memphis AAU coach, Keith Easterwood, who told CBSSports.com that Hamilton had called him in 2012 and asked, "How can I make money off of a basketball player?"

Hamilton refused to comment at the time but told SI in June that he has a text message exchange proving Easterwood was the one who'd asked the damning question. Hamilton says that when he showed their text exchange to Kentucky's compliance staff, "they almost started laughing, and said, 'This is it? Are you serious?' They said we were fine."

Hamilton and his wife declined SI's requests to see the texts, on the grounds that they don't want to fuel more controversy. Easterwood says that after he provided information to the NCAA, he was asked not to talk publicly about Hamilton. Calipari said on Aug. 1 that he is confident Labissiere will be cleared to play.

If they were trying to cash in, the Hamiltons say, they would've accepted the pitch from Ole Miss. The Rebels' coach, Andy Kennedy, had offered Hamilton—whose highest coaching experience was as a prep-school assistant—one of the program's three full-time assistant positions, hoping to net Labissiere in an NCAA-legal package deal. "That was real," Hamilton says, "but I told them when they offered, I'm going to have to talk to Skal, but if he's not interested, then we're just going to keep moving. And that's what happened." (Kennedy says he does not recall that conversation with Hamilton.)

There are also conflicting explanations for what happened to Jean-Gilles, the other Haitian who moved in with the Hamiltons

in August 2010. In the summer of '11 they put him on a bus to Boston, where he had relatives, and told him to finish high school there. An ECS coach told *The [Memphis] Commercial Appeal* that Hamilton had asked him about Jean-Gilles's potential to receive a D-I scholarship and was told it was unlikely. This allegedly happened in the days before Jean-Gilles's departure, and he believes that conversation was the catalyst. "They didn't think I was going to make it as a scholarship player," he says.

The Hamiltons, who later blocked a Memphis family's attempt to assume guardianship of Jean-Gilles, told the paper that he was sent away for being a "bad influence." Labissiere says Jean-Gilles was "sent away for a reason" but will not elaborate. Valmera, who believes Jean-Gilles's version, has vowed never to allow Hamilton to work with Haitian prospects again.

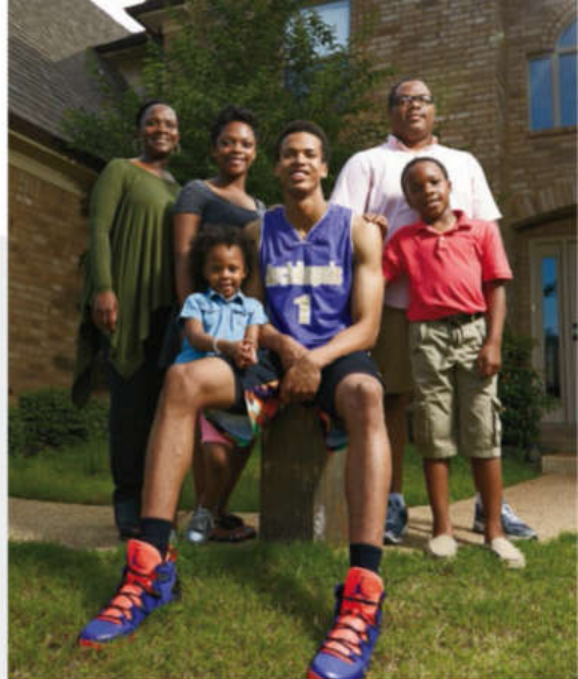
The most distressing scrutiny of his guardians, Labissiere says, came just before Christmas 2014, when an investigator from the Mississippi Department of Human Services showed up at their house, requesting to interview him and the Hamiltons' three children. "She came into my room and asked questions like, Was I being mistreated? Did I like it here?" Labissiere says. "I told her I liked it here. We were just like, Is this some kind of joke?" The investigator, Hamilton says, explained that someone—she couldn't say who—had called and alleged wrongdoing. They say the investigator found no evidence of it, apologized and left. They still do not know the source of the complaint.

On one of Labissiere's final nights before departing for Kentucky in June, he gathered with the extended Hamilton family in the living room. A large, cardboard cutout of Labissiere's head—a souvenir from the Jordan Brand Classic—sat atop a ceramic floor vase. They watched the original *Jurassic Park* on E!, and Labissiere received a pedicure from a family friend who had brought over her footbath and kit.

Earlier, he had been soccer-juggling a basketball in the driveway with his best friend, Aldair Carlos, who came to Memphis from Angola. They met at Lausanne Collegiate, the private school Labissiere attended after transferring from ECS following his junior year. In yet another chapter of this saga, the transfer led to Labissiere's being ruled ineligible, so he played his senior season for Reach Your Dream Prep, a team affiliated with a fledgling school that Hamilton created—but that Labissiere did not attend.

An international player's dream has been derailed before by the NCAA—Turkish recruit Enes Kanter never played a game for Kentucky in 2010–11—but Labissiere believes his case is different. "I'm going to be eligible," he asserts. "We didn't do anything under the table."

STILL, REPORTERS asking about Labissiere are regarded with caution. When SI first contacted Hamilton, in December 2014, he said that Kentucky had asked him and Labissiere not to give interviews. (They broke their silence in April.) In Port-au-Prince, the arrival of a reporter is met, by some of those close to Labissiere, with trepidation, the fear that one wrong word could jeopardize his future. In one case it takes three days to persuade Labissiere's coach



Dream Analysis The foundation started by Gerald Hamilton (with glasses) has brought his family under scrutiny.

"Someone coming from Haiti and becoming the first pick in the NBA is like a dream," says a former neighbor.

from Canado-Haitien, Jhon Guerrier, to meet near the school—and then have him state that he'll only consider doing an interview in New York City, where he'll be traveling on Sept. 1. (He never showed in New York City.)

Meanwhile, Labissiere asks that his parents not be interviewed, and Hamilton says not to write "anything about [Labissiere's] parents" for fear of drawing unwanted attention to them in Haiti. It's a peculiar request, but Labissiere could soon become the most valuable human export of a nation that is still plagued by kidnappings for ransom. (After reaching out to Lesly through Valbrun, and confirming the family's reluctance as well as a few key details, they were left alone.)

Haitians outside of Labissiere's inner circle, though, speak about him with a sense of wonder. A visit to Canado-Haitien, where teenagers play pickup games in the rebuilt school's asphalt courtyard, turns up a classmate from Labissiere's final year. Kevin Brillant, now a 19-year-old university student, heard an update about Labissiere on a sports radio show and was amazed that the friendly Skal, who used to talk with him about Kevin Garnett and the Celtics and who almost always wore an extra shirt under his school uniform—rules forbid playing basketball in dress whites—was on the verge of fame.

Brillant says he watched a YouTube mixtape of Labissiere and concluded, "He's not the skinny kid from our school anymore."

The address Labissiere provides for his old apartment—35 Rue Jean-Baptiste, the building that crumbled and set him free—is near the school. Finding it requires paying a taxi driver and following his maroon Haojin motorbike off Canapé Vert's main drag, down a dirt road to an unlabeled, three-block stretch of cracked pavement. Many of the street's gates lack numbers, and many no longer protect dwellings. Behind one is a concrete slab, empty except for a weightlifting apparatus, configured for lat pull-downs, rusting in the sun.

A group of young men sitting on benches under the shade of a tree take interest. One ventures a guess, in Creole, as to the purpose of this unexpected visit. The word that's clear without the assistance of a translator is *Labissiere*.

Emmanuel Joseph, 29, points to a newly constructed, two-story yellow house, behind a metal gate with a padlock, and says it's where the Labissieres used to live, in a rented apartment on the top floor. Someone else recently rebuilt on the site. "The construction is so fresh," he says, "that you can still see their old gate inside, where the kids used to have a little basketball hoop."

The men remember Labissiere as a frail kid and his family as the kind that never disturbed anyone in the neighborhood. After 35 Rue Jean-Baptiste fell, Joseph says, he was one of those

who helped Lesly pull the rest of his family out of the rubble.

It was common for Haitians to lose track of neighbors who survived. People scattered, resettling anywhere they could find safe shelter. It was in the past year that Joseph, a basketball player himself, heard talk of another Haitian possibly joining Dalember in the NBA. Joseph googled for details and made the wide-eyed discovery that the Haitian was Labissiere. It was neighborhood knowledge that the boy had left for the U.S., but his progress had not been reported.

"Someone coming from Haiti and becoming the first pick in the NBA is like a dream," Joseph says, pointing heavenward for emphasis. "People here will see this and work hard to become the next Skäl."

Joseph insists that Haiti has plenty of athletes, if only people would come to find them. Just sitting next to him, he says, is a soccer player and two more basketball players. Good players, in their 20s and 30s, who never had opportunities. It is early on a Friday afternoon, and the lone car parked on Rue Jean-Baptiste, down past Labissiere's childhood courtyard, is a tap-tap with a line of Creole in fading paint on the side of its cab. *Plante yon ti pye bwa jodi a l ap bon demen*, which means, roughly, Plant a tree today, and it will be good for tomorrow. An old Haitian saying about the future, enduring into a present where planting isn't always best for the seed. For Skäl Labissiere to grow, he had to be carried off on the wind. □

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Meanings to An End

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

THEY SAY athletes die twice, and it's true that retirement and death can be hard to tell apart. Both elicit tears and testimonials. They involve abrupt transitions to a new state (Florida, eternity) without income tax. The newly expired, like the newly retired, see a sudden uptick in leisure time. But the two are not exactly the same, and it's the second death—actually *dying*—that's the doozy.

Death is all around us in October, and not just in the falling leaves and the glow-in-the-dark skeletons and the eight-year-old zombies intent on eating our KitKats. This postseason, baseball players are wearing death on their sleeves. The Cubs' 14 patch commemorating Ernie Banks, the Cardinals' OT patch for Oscar Taveras, the Astros' MH patch for broadcaster Milo Hamilton and the Yankees' 8 patch for Yogi Berra all serve as reminders that baseball may not have a clock but the rest of us do, so perhaps you could stop fiddling with your batting gloves and get on with it already.

If anyone knows that, it's the Oldest Living Major League Baseball Player, Mike Sandlock, who turns 100 on Oct. 17. Sandlock briefly played catcher for the 1942 Boston Braves, and his name, befitting a player of that era, is a pleasing echo of *sandlot*. Eddie Carnett, who had a cup of coffee with the '41 Braves and turns 99 on Oct. 21, is the Second-Oldest Living Major Leaguer—he's in the on-deck circle, as it were—and the advanced ages of both near-teammates have given them a prominence unforeseeable when they retired six decades ago.

These lives deep into extra innings, and those just summoned to the celestial postseason, call to me. Harry Gallatin, a basketball Hall of Famer who played for the Knicks in the 1950s, died on Oct. 7 at 88. You may not know his name—AutoCorrect didn't, just now, and suggested *Harry Gallstones* instead—but death often reacquaints us with an athlete, or introduces him to younger readers.

Harry (the Horse) Gallatin was so thoroughly equine (the surname even sounds like *gallopin'*) that he was photographed in street clothes in his playing days giving a horsey-back ride to his sons. Viewed from the remove of 60 years, this scene of Eisenhower-era domestic bliss conjures a warm feeling for the man and is my sole memory of him.

Death is not just a great leveler but also a great elevator, returning some men to fame and bringing glory to others for the very first time.


What's the best obituary you read this year?
Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@SteveRushin**

Last week the Suns announced the death of former forward Neal Walk, the second pick in the 1969 draft, after Lew Alcindor. As with Gallatin, there was a certain felicity to Walk's name, which I always heard as *Kneel, Walk*, the two stages of a baby's development after *Crawl*. Only upon his death did I read that Walk used a wheelchair for his last three decades, though the beauty of an athlete's obituary is that it is always accompanied by a photograph of the man in his physical prime, all hair and muscle and sideburns.

In this way death is not just a great leveler but also a great elevator, returning some men to fame and bringing glory to others for the very first time. Nietzsche wrote, "Some men are born posthumously," and as with Nietzsche, so with Nitschke. When former Packers linebacker Ray Nitschke died in 1998, his *New York Times* obituary cited death as his footballing motivator. "My father died when I was three, my mother when I was 14," said Nitschke, "so I took it out on all the kids in the neighborhood." Nearly 20 years on, that's my main Nitschke memory.

Not every athlete dies twice. Thurman Munson's death at 32, in a plane crash in the prime of his career, was the first time someone I knew, or felt I knew, died. As a 12-year-old on vacation hearing the news in a Holiday Inn in Arlington, Va., I feared flying home to Minnesota and experienced the first hint of my own mortality.

Another Yankees legend died recently: Not Yogi, but 85-year-old Helen Fowler, whose obituary in the Newark *Star-Ledger* described her thusly: "Mrs. Fowler was a lifelong member of the Cranford First Aid Squad and a lifelong Yankees fan, with the exception of Alex Rodriguez." And so Mrs. Fowler is heckling from the great beyond, trolling from an astral plane, making even death appear strangely life-affirming. □



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